



## SILVER SPRING CITIZENS ADVISORY BOARD

April 13, 2021

Marc Elrich, County Executive  
Montgomery County

[*Delivered via e-mail*]

*Advice from the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board re:*

### ***EQUITABLE DIGITAL ACCESS***

Dear County Executive Elrich,

We applaud Montgomery County's efforts, through the Office of Broadband Programs, to provide low cost internet via multiple providers to families impacted by the pandemic. Yet for many in our community, obstacles to digital access continue.

In March 2020, when Montgomery County was struck by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, families that previously did not often use or have access to the internet were instantly placed into a situation where they needed internet access to communicate with work, with family, and, most of all, with teachers. The Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board appreciates the effort of the County Council, as well as Montgomery County Public Schools and Montgomery County Public Libraries, in quickly mobilizing efforts to make sure any student within the county had access to a computer as well as the potential to pick up a free hotspot.

Our concern is that despite these noble efforts, many families are still struggling to access basic internet. For example, in the October 26 meeting, Neighborhood Committee of the Silver Spring Citizen's Advisory Board, we heard from a Montgomery County teacher who shared a letter from her student who expressed frustration at discussed having to complete his homework on his phone since it provided the best internet access. We also heard about families that, for various reasons, did not qualify for the low income internet program but also did not have enough money to afford regular priced internet. Furthermore, according to the Office of Broadband Program site, the ability to sign up for low-cost internet ended on December 31.

**EQUITABLE DIGITAL ACCESS**

**Given that virtual learning in Montgomery County most likely will continue through June 2021 (and perhaps further), we advise the County to consider multiple ways to provide support to families who are still in need.** These could include:

- Expanding the low-cost broadband program through at least August 2021,
- Creating a tier-level system so that families that make more than the minimum amount but who cannot afford the regular cost of internet can access affordable internet,
- Expanding the Montgomery County Public Libraries' WiFi program, which provides internet beyond the confines of the branches, as well as the lending ability for the hotspots, and/or
- Allowing exceptions so that current customers of Verizon, RCN or Comcast are allowed to apply for the low-cost internet even if they already have an active plan.

In a county where the digital divide directly correlates to the income and geography of county citizens, we advise the County to leverage its relationship with these larger companies to ensure community connectivity to address the growing digital divide, particularly for the children who are in remote learning.

As always, we appreciate your consideration of the advice that we send.

Lysette House\*  
Chair

Sofia Bushen\*  
Vice-Chair

Parliamentarian  
Melanie Funder Kaye\*

Secretary  
Katherine Lucas McKay\*

*(\*Signatures on file)*

CC:

Montgomery County Council Members  
Reemberto Rodriguez, Silver Spring Regional Area Director  
Members of the SSCAB