



Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony
County Council Resolution – Declaration of Racism as a Public Health Crisis
Tuesday, June 16, 2020

The Montgomery County Community Action Board (CAB) strongly supports the County Council Resolution declaring racism a public health crisis. CAB greatly appreciates the Council's ongoing support for equity principles and its previous legislation that has addressed inequities in our County, including increasing the minimum wage, requiring earned sick and safe leave, expanding access to early care and education, improving renters' rights, banning pay history in employment decisions, and allocating funding to health and other programs that reduce disparities.

At this moment, when the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting and killing African Americans at significantly higher rates, and when African Americans continue to be unfairly targeted, harmed, and killed at the hands of law enforcement, the CAB believes that we must do everything in our power to address what is without a doubt a public health emergency. Systemic racism throughout our nation's history has led to our current situation where racial and ethnic minorities are consistently disadvantaged and it is systemic racism that must be dismantled in order to bring about any real change.

While the CAB strongly supports this Resolution, we hope that it leads to the implementation of policies and the commitment of funding for programs that can reduce significant disparities that plague our County. Specifically, CAB recommends additional funding for health programs serving minority communities. There needs to be a careful examination of how the County is serving African Americans in particular, given the higher rates of maternal and infant mortality,

heart disease, Diabetes, and other health issues.¹ The CAB also supports funding for additional training of health professionals whose own biases can directly impact the health outcomes for patients.

Because poverty is a significant contributing factor to health outcomes and because the poverty rate is disproportionately high for African Americans and Hispanic members of our community, the CAB strongly recommends implementing policies that will reduce economic disparities. These include expansion of affordable housing and childcare, increased training and educational programs that help people find employment that leads to self-sufficiency, and increased wages and work supports such as paid leave, along with transportation and childcare assistance.² We applaud the Council's previous support for tax credits for lower-income households and encourage the Council to continue to explore innovative tax credit options that help families pay for basic necessities, reduce debt, and move towards self-sufficiency.

With regard to "poverty" and reducing disparities, it is important to note that the Federal Poverty Level is significantly lower than the Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Standard. For example, the Standard, which measure the actual cost of living in a given geographic location, is \$105,925 for a family of four with two working adults, one preschooler and one infant – four times the FPL for a family this size.³ The CAB asks that the Council consider the SSS when making policy decisions, as it is a more a more realistic reflection of the challenges facing members of our community. If we are to truly remove the barriers that perpetuate economic inequality generation after generation, we must consider the local cost of living and the unique challenges presented here in the County.

Understanding that systemic racism has contributed to the disparities in our educational system, we ask the Council to work with the Board of Education to develop policies and programs that improve outcomes for minority and lower-income students in Montgomery

¹ Montgomery County African American Health Program - aahpmontgomerycounty.org/

² 2019-2022 Community Needs Assessment montgomerycountymd.gov/communityaction

³ Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Standard Report montgomerycountymd.gov/communityaction

County Public Schools. The higher suspension rates, lower graduation rates, and higher prevalence of novice teachers for lower-income, minority students in MCPS is entirely unacceptable. Additional funding is necessary to support experienced teachers and provide wrap-around services at higher needs schools where more students are struggling. We also ask the Council to work with the BOE to explore innovative solutions such as adjustments to school boundaries that can reduce the opportunity gap, even if these solutions may be unpopular with segments of the population.

As the governing body for the Community Action Agency, part of a national network that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement, we want to note that the agency continues to strive to meet the needs of the County's racial and ethnic minority communities. This year, 41% of the clients served by the agency's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program were African American and 31% were Hispanic/Latino. The Takoma-East Silver Spring (TESS) Community Action Center has served minority residents of the Long Branch community for over fifty years, primarily recent immigrants from Latin American and Africa. Our own board includes members from diverse backgrounds and of the 66 graduates of our highly successful Community Advocacy Institute, the majority have been African American and Hispanic County residents. Our agency's staff also includes people of diverse backgrounds and multilingual capabilities. Six of the agency's fourteen full-time staff members are African American and five are Hispanic/Latino. Additionally, the 50+ contracts monitored by the agency serve the County's diverse population. Our agency and board will continue to examine our policies and programs though to ensure that we are incorporating equity principles into all of our work.

The CAB is incredibly grateful to the Council for its ongoing efforts to implement policies that address systemic racism. We fully support the principles laid out in this Resolution and look forward to working with the Council to combat racism and achieve greater equity in the County.