

THE ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

HOWARD COUNTY'S COUNTY EXECUTIVE BUDGET HEARING

March 17, 2010

TESTIMONY

**Submitted by:
Harry Schwarz, Vice President**

Good evening. My name is Harry Schwarz and I am speaking on behalf of the Association of Community Services (ACS). ACS is an organization that represents over 125 service providers and community advocates in Howard County. ACS members provide services to over 200,000 County residents annually.

We are well aware of the significant budget crisis that is impacting our State and County that is part of a global problem. The unemployment rate in the County has nearly doubled in the past year and many families and individuals have been forced to seek services from our members for the first time. Howard County may be viewed as one of the wealthiest counties in the United States; yet three years of budget deficits have taken their toll. Intractable problems such as affordable housing and public transportation become even more critical than before.

In the last three months, Howard County has faced record high snowfalls and excessive snow removal further strapping an already strained budget. Without the anticipated income of gaming revenues and other taxes, the State Budget is proposing sweeping changes that include: permanently reduce the amount of state funding to local jurisdictions (40% reduction for Howard County); requiring Counties to pay 100% of law clerk salary for each circuit court judge; limit per pupil spending for education; assume more of the teacher pension fund costs; and a \$5.7 million reduction in transportation funding to Howard County.

With funding so limited, the need for public transportation is skyrocketing. We appreciate that, with grant funding, the administration has moved ahead with a number of "First Phase" recommendations from the 2009 Howard County Transportation Development Plan. However, as the financial situation for the County continues to deteriorate we urge, as a pressing priority, preserving the current levels of public transportation services for para-transit riders and other transportation-dependent persons. From medical appointments to jobs, most Howard Transit rides are essential, not optional. At a minimum, we urge you keep continue current levels of service except where reliable, public data conclusively demonstrate that a service is not being utilized or otherwise extraneous.

At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the fact that Howard County needs a Housing Trust Fund to create greater affordable housing capacity now more than ever as the need is rapidly rising. There continue to be over 3,000 on the waiting list for public housing vouchers and rental assistance.

ACS and our members are most grateful to you, Mr. Ulman for your continued support for human services through the Community Service Partnerships (CSP) grant program. Howard County has steadfastly supported human services by increasing the CSP budget. This is especially important as many of the State funded programs have experienced significant reductions. We applaud you for establishing the Board to Promote Self-Sufficiency and the Nonprofit Resource Development Council as mechanisms that enable human services and nonprofit communities to operate more efficiently and effectively in these lean times; and more importantly, make self sufficiency a reality for many of our most vulnerable residents.

During the first quarter of FY 2010, CSP partners experienced the following cuts to services:

- The ARC of Howard County - **\$289,600** resulting in two years without staff raises; loss of six positions; reduction in direct services including respite funding for families and financial assistance to families.
- Community Action Council - **\$50,000** for Head Start Summer Enrichment as well as 10% cuts to Homeless Prevention and Emergency & Transitional Housing services.
- Domestic Violence Center - **\$33,273** reducing the housing program from four to three houses, freezing the vacant assistant director position and eliminating the help line coordinator.
- FIRN - **\$140,554** eliminating interpreter services for 90 Maternity Clinic patients; loss of smoking cessation outreach and other health prevention programs; reduction of tutoring services for ESOL children in Howard County Public Schools.
- Grassroots - **\$77,353** – eliminating two staff positions in the family shelter program; loss of 180 bed nights in the emergency motel stay program; and reducing of financial aid to homeless families.

At the same time these cuts occurred, the demand for services increased significantly from 2008 to 2009 for the following:

- Grassroots experienced an 87% increase in hotline calls for financial assistance; a 100% increase in the number of shelter turn-aways due to lack of space; and 66% of those who were sheltered were minors.
- Community Action Council received over 2,300 requests for energy assistance since July 2009 with an overall 200% increase in requests for FY 2009.
- There was a 100% increase in the number of unsheltered individuals in 2009 as compared to 2007.

As difficult as it is for CSP programs, government agencies are fairing worse in many regards. Over the last three years, Department of Social Services (DSS), Howard County Health

Department (HCHD) and the Mental Health Authority (MHA) have experienced multiple drastic cuts in services. Many of the cuts reduced staffing resulting in decreased access to services and entitlement programs at the same time the need is increasing.

- DSS experienced a significant increase in the request for services in the past year; a 45% increase in requests for temporary cash assistance (TCA) and a 21% increase in paid TCA cases. The number of households on Food Stamps has increased by 35%. As the need increases, it becomes more difficult for DSS to process applications due to significant reductions in case worker staff positions that have continuously occurred over the past three years. Whereas it used to take one - two weeks to process an application, it now can take a month or more. This is a phenomenon experienced across the State as recent news articles have reported
- The Health Department was forced to close their Maternity Clinic which served 300 low-income women. A 35% cut to core funding has resulted in severe staffing shortages; Women, Infants and Children (WIC) clients have increased by 8%.
- HCHD further notes that processing delays due to DSS staff shortages impacts the Maryland Child Health Insurance Program (MCHIP) slowing the number of clients being approved for the program.
- The Mental Health Authority experienced an 8.5% cut in state funds including a full time mental health professional; 20% reduction in funding for the Foreign-Born Outreach grant that provides outpatient treatment services in the native language to low income, uninsured county residents; and \$53,000 cut to various flexible funds available to HCMHA to assist consumers of mental health services with emergencies such as eviction prevention, BGE cut-offs etc.

- During these stressful times, many more individuals seek crisis and other mental health services. It is critical that the Mobile Crisis Team be funded at its current level at a minimum.

While the economy struggles, the need for services has increased across the board. The last three months increased fuel fund requests and the need for the cold weather shelter. In these challenging economic times, the County must continue to implement every measure and mechanism at its disposal to “hold harmless” human services programs.

County Executive Ulman, it is imperative that effective human services programs be preserved and protected to meet the **growing** needs of the most vulnerable citizens in Howard County. These are the very people who are experiencing the most devastating effects of the poor economy and reduced services.

We strongly support full funding of the vital human services through the Community Service Partnership program. We must also strive to increase human services funding and restore previous funding cuts. We avidly support development of a Housing Trust to help ensure affordable housing for lower income County residents.

I thank you for the opportunity to comment during this critical budget period.

Respectfully,

Harry Schwarz
ACS Vice President