



April 5, 2017

Testimony in Support of
FY 2018 Funding for Monitored Exchange and Supervised Visitation Center(s)

The Montgomery County Chapter of the National Organization of Women (MCNOW) is pleased to urge support for the County Executive's budget request for \$250,000 in Fiscal Year 2018 to fund a **Monitored Exchange and Supervised Visitation Center**. In addition, MCNOW asks the Council to supplement this budget request to allow the Center to operate extended hours beyond what can be provided with \$250,000. This amount allows for only 14 hours of exchanges and supervised visits, which means the Center would not be available on Wednesday and Friday evenings, as well as Saturdays and Sundays. Saturday and Sunday hours are particularly critical to accommodate parents' work schedules.

The need for this Center is great. It will provide a safe place for supervised visits between a child/children and a parent who is subject to a restraining order as a result of domestic violence. It will also serve as a "safe exchange" place, where victims of domestic violence can bring their children for required visitation with the noncustodial parent without the need for contact between the two parties with a protective order.

It is hard to imagine any issue more important than the safety and well-being of our children. Children who live in families experiencing domestic violence between their parents (or partners) are themselves subject to physical and psychological abuse. Such trauma can follow these children throughout their lives, and without proper intervention, as discussed in the Court Watch report *In the Best Interest of the Child?*, puts them at risk for serious health risks such as substance abuse, obesity, cancer, heart disease and depression. It affects their young brains to such an extent that they may not excel in school due to the inability to concentrate and to develop the essential skills they need to thrive.

As advocates for women and their families, MCNOW believes that the establishment of this Center in the County is critically needed. In fact, two Centers are needed, one to serve down-County residents and one to serve up-County residents. While the County has made great strides in addressing the many complex issues related to domestic violence, not providing such centers and relevant services is a major missing element in the existing system. The Center will provide supportive environments for both children and their mothers, giving them time for healing to begin, while allowing for the de-escalation of tensions. The noncustodial parent also benefits by uninterrupted time devoted only to the children and by being exposed to good parenting modeling.

In summary, women who are suffering from domestic violence are living in constant fear of additional assault or harassment not only to themselves, but to their children. In spite of these circumstances, they have been ordered by the Courts to allow visitation between their children and their abuser. It is incumbent upon us as a community to ensure that the children and women are safe in such situations. Safety is first and foremost in starting the healing process and allowing women and their children to move to independence. Funding the Center and providing for extended hours beyond the budget request will be a major step towards achieving a truly holistic approach to addressing domestic violence.

Thank you for the opportunity to express MCNOW's support for this important budget request.

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