



**Howard County Council Public Hearing
April 29, 2015**

FY 2016 County Operating Budget

Good evening Chairman Sigaty, Vice Chairperson Weinstein and Council members. As President of the Association of Community Services, it is my privilege to offer testimony on behalf of our 115 nonprofit member organizations and community advocates who work diligently on behalf of over 200,000 County residents each year.

Our county population still includes over 20,000 households—nearly 18 percent—that earn less than \$50,000 a year. If there is any good news in that figure, it is that the 20,000 is a decrease of 2,000 from the previous year. On the other hand, the number of households earning less than \$25,000 a year has increased to over 8,200—now 7 percent of Howard County’s households. And as of this past March, there were 484 homeless children in those households.

We are in the process of updating the *ACS Self-Sufficiency Report*, which we will get to you just as soon as it is completed. While the data are preliminary, I can say at this time that the need for services and supports in our community since 2013 has not abated but continues to increase. ACS is therefore sincerely appreciative of the continued commitment of the County Executive and this Council to the County’s nonprofit sector—particularly through Community Service Partnership grants.

Because of continuing Administration and Council support for the Plan to End Homelessness, the Coordinated System of Homeless Services is up and running. While there has been significant progress made in efficiently and effectively coordinating services and allocating resources among eighteen agencies, it is important to note that Grassroots still is receiving more than 70 calls per month from people who are or are about to be homeless and more than 200 households are currently receiving or awaiting case management by Bridges to Housing Stability and other agencies to help them resolve their housing crisis. We are grateful for the Plan to End Homelessness funding included in this budget, but point out that it is the minimum amount required to maintain the current level of service. Over the long term, additional resources will be needed to reach the Plan goal.

Homelessness is the appropriate segue to the topic of housing that is affordable to those in our community with incomes below \$50,000. The Plan to End Homelessness embraces the “Housing First” concept that has proven across the nation that once housed, individuals and families can more productively address the challenges that led to their homelessness. The proposed Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) budget that will support development of Single Efficiency Apartments aligns with the “Housing First” strategy—and is a huge and appreciated step for this county in meeting the needs of the chronically homeless.

But even a five (5) percent cut to the Department’s budget will hamper efforts to increase the number of affordable rental units for households that are currently or are about to be homeless because they cannot afford to pay Howard County’s high rents. Mixed income housing developments and acquiring and redeveloping older affordable housing complexes will not alone create the needed 6700 units for these low-income county residents. DHCD and the Housing Commission need to have the means to respond to opportunities as they present themselves—whether they are by acquiring scattered site units, incentivizing property owners and developers or instituting new strategies that are working in other jurisdictions.

Affordable, accessible housing is commonly agreed upon as the most important first step in helping low income residents, and residents with behavioral or physical disabilities, become productive members of our community. Throughout the past two years there has been extensive talk about the need for a county wide housing strategy. Are there sufficient resources in this budget to begin to develop a Housing Master Plan?

Beyond CSP grants, the Plan to End Homelessness and housing, we are appreciative and strongly supportive of all the resources allocated in this budget that will help keep the Howard County safety net in place for the most vulnerable in our community. But, as you are considering this Operations Budget and as we work together this next (fiscal) year, we ask you to remember that there are still holes in the safety net. Mending those holes is, of course, not solely government's responsibility. To help ensure that the private sector is also engaged in net mending, ACS continues to work with the nonprofit community to foster efficiencies, diversify funding sources and build relationships with the business community. And, as always, we appreciate the opportunities that you present our organization to engage with you and give voice to those in our community who cannot speak for themselves.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Ande Kolp
ACS President