



Sheppard Pratt

Discovery Station Early Head Start Community Assessment Program Year 2020-2021



2020-2021 Community Assessment

This Family Services' Discovery Station Early Head Start (EHS) *Community Assessment Report for 2020-2021* is based on census data, program surveys, and relevant research reports. This new report provides new information that should be considered as EHS seeks to meet community needs and maximize partnerships in the 2020-2021 program year.

Documents reviewed for this update included *Readiness Matters: The 2019-2020 Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Report (MSDE and Ready at Five, 2019)*; *Montgomery County Early Care and Education Strategic Plan 2017 (MCDHHS, 2017)*; *Montgomery County Early Care & Education Initiative Action Plan 2020(MCDHHS, 2019)*; *Self-Sufficiency Standard for Montgomery County, Maryland (Maryland Community Action Partnership 2018)*; *Early Care and Education Trends and Key Factors (Montgomery Moving Forward, January 2018)*; *Child Care Demographics 2021: Montgomery County Report (Maryland Family Network, 2020)*; *Child Care in Montgomery County (Office of Legislative Oversight, 2016)*; *Montgomery County Commission on Child Care Annual Report 2017-2018 (Commission on Child Care, November 2018)*; *Demographic Snapshot for Montgomery County, MD (Montgomery Moving Forward, Fall 2016)*; *Montgomery County Head Start Community Assessment (Montgomery County Community Action, January 2020)*; *Montgomery County Department of Health & Human Services FY17 Annual Report (July 2018)*; *COVID Trends Operational Child Care Operational Survey (Child Care Resource & Referral Center 2020)*; *Community Action Agency Community Needs Assessment (September 2019)*; *Meeting the Challenge: Maryland's Early Learning Response to COVID-19 (Ready at Five, 2020)*; *Economic Indicators for Montgomery County and Surrounding Jurisdictions, (Montgomery County Council January 2022)*; *State of Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (Essential Employee Definition)*; *Montgomery County Government, COVID-19 Information Portal*; *Montgomery County, July 14th EARP Private Pay Report*; *Point in Time Study*
<https://montgomerycountymd.gov/homelessness/Numbers.html>; *Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission* <http://www.hocmc.org/>; *Montgomery County Housing First Plan Implementation Status Update April 2017*
<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/SNHS/rent-relief.html>; *Department of Health and Human Services, Montgomery County Government*
<https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Public-Charge-What-Advocates-Need-to-Know-Now.pdf>; *National Immigration Law Center*

Strategic Planning for Early Care and Education in Montgomery County, MD

Building on the *Montgomery County Early Care and Education Strategic Plan 2017: Investments in Our Future* (MCDHHS, 2017), the *Montgomery County Early Care & Education Initiative Action Plan 2020* (MCDHHS, 2019) was released in 2019. In March 2019, Montgomery County Executive, Marc Elrich, and previous Council President Nancy Navarro announced that early care and education is a top priority for the county. Together with County Council members, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), and Montgomery College, Mr. Elrich and Ms. Navarro launched the Early Care and Education (ECE) Initiative. Recognizing the need for a comprehensive system of high quality accessible and affordable early childhood education, these collaborators developed an organizational structure for the four-year initiative and set priorities for year one. The county made an initial investment of \$7 million in year one.

The ECE Initiative's organizational framework was created to help guide planning and implementation. An executive committee, steering committee, interagency workgroup, and stakeholder group form the main structure. Subcommittees were formed with representatives from Montgomery County Government, Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, and community associations and organizations.

The Executive Committee is comprised of the County Executive, County Council President, Superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools, President of Montgomery College and the Director of Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services.

The Steering Committee includes representation from the Interagency Workgroup and Stakeholders. Each representative provides a unique knowledge base that enhances the overall implementation of the ECE Initiative.

The Interagency Work Group is comprised of representatives from Montgomery County Government Departments, Montgomery County Public Schools, and Montgomery College together with a Stakeholder Group with individuals from representative groups including commissions, boards, associations, non-profit organizations, and businesses in Montgomery County joined together to work on the goals of the Initiative through subcommittees.

The subcommittees are broken into the following groups: Access and Affordability; Facilities; Financing; Public Education and Community-Based ECE Partnerships; and Workforce and Training. Ultimately, the ECE Initiative is a holistic approach to childcare and education, involving all stakeholders as illustrated below in the Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF) model.

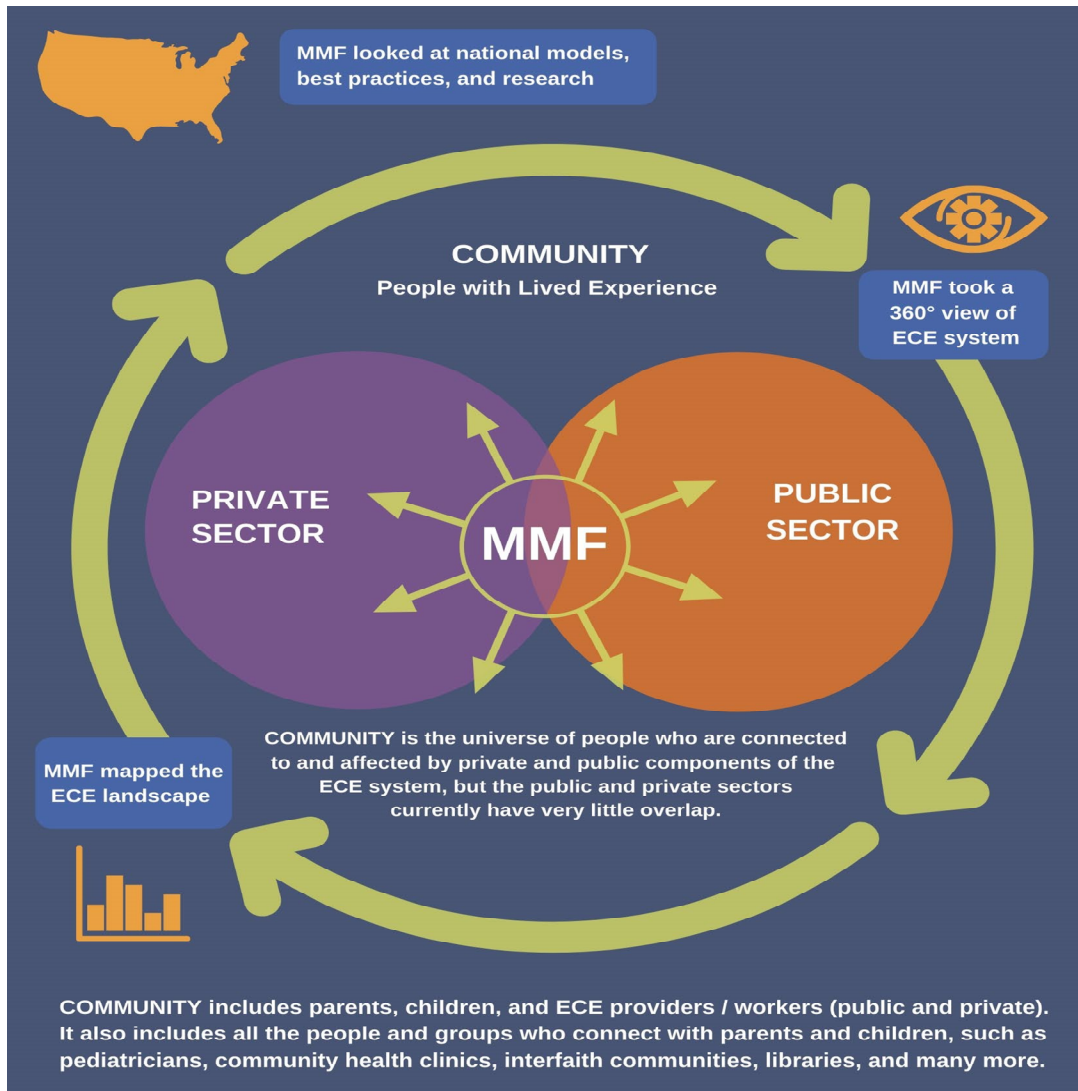


Fig 1: MMF model adapted from Recommendations for a Public-Private ECE Coordinating Entity in Montgomery County, Maryland

The MMF, as indicated in Fig 1, takes a 360° view of the ECE system, implying that no area of childcare and education is left unexplored. The connectedness of people in the public and private sector forms a united force aimed at the child’s wellbeing and cognitive development. Ordinarily, it is the level of organization that determines the operational success or failure of institutions. With such high-level coordination, the Montgomery County strategically positions itself for effective child development.

Demographics

According to the *2020 U.S. Census Bureau*, Montgomery County, Maryland has 492.9 square miles of land area and is the 5th largest county in Maryland by total area with a total population of 1,062,061. The median household income in Montgomery County is \$110,389 as compared to \$86,738 in Maryland.

According to *Data USA*, the 5 largest ethnic groups in Montgomery County, MD are

- White (Non-Hispanic) (42.6%),
- Black or African American (Non-Hispanic) (18.6%),
- Asian (Non-Hispanic) (14.8%),
- Other (Hispanic) (9.69%),
- White (Hispanic) (8.45%).

41.7% of the households in Montgomery County, MD speak a non-English language at home as their primary language.

Data presented in the *Community Action Agency's Community Assessment (2019)* reveal that beyond its geographic and demographic diversity, Montgomery County also boasts its status as one of the most well-educated and wealthiest counties in the nation and is consistently ranked as one of the "most livable" in America. However, hidden amidst the county's great prosperity is a largely unnoticed population: the 75,000+ residents living below the national poverty level. Using data from the United States Census Bureau, the Hidden Hardships report explores trends in the numbers and characteristics of Montgomery County residents living in poverty. All data contained in this report were gathered from multiple years of the American Community Survey (both 1- and 5-year estimates) and, unless otherwise specified, poverty is defined as living below 100% of the federal poverty level (respective of family/household size).

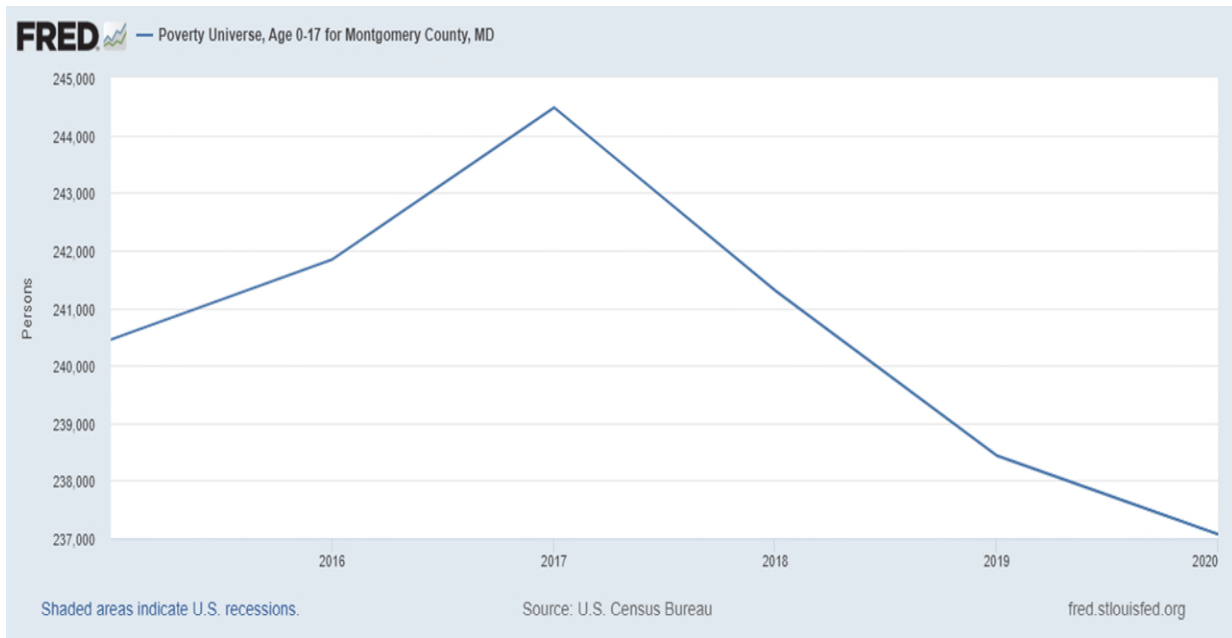


Fig 2: Adapted from FRED St. Louis fed’s *Economic Research*

The graph in Fig.2 shows the number of children aged 0-17 living in poverty in the Montgomery County. Although there was a remarkable downward trend by 2020, the figure of 18,000 is still huge for the total population of children. Such a figure is especially alarming, considering that the county has been implementing numerous initiatives to improve children’s wellbeing. It’s noted that because of public charge and the political climate during 2017-2021, many families may have chosen not to report or access services and therefore this is maybe an underestimation of the actual number of children living in poverty.

Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF), a cross-sector group of business and community leaders in Montgomery County committed to finding innovative solutions to critical issues for the community, has identified early care and education as the key issue for its collective action again this year. MMF released its *Call to Action: Early Care and Education Executive Summary* in 2018 noting there are 67,600 children under the age of 5 in Montgomery County.

In Fall 2019 (Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Data)

- 33% of kindergarteners entering Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) were Latino/Hispanic, 27% were White, 20% were Black or African American, 13% were Asian and 5% were two or more races
- 25% of kindergarteners are English Language Learners (ELL)
- 33.8% of MCPS students are direct certified*. From 2007 to 2016 the overall number of students participating in FARMS increased from 33,580 to 54,542 students
- 391 children were served in Foster Care in 2015 compared to 387 the previous year

*Through direct certification, school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program, match the names of children living in households that receive SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance (TANF), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits with school enrollment records. This match is then used to certify students for free school meals without the need for their families to complete a school meals application.

According to the PY20 Program Information Report for Discovery Station EHS:

- 70% of EHS parents had completed education equal to or less than a high school graduate degree
- 86% of families spoke a language other than English as their primary language at home
- Of the 179 families served, 74 were single-parent family homes
- Of those single-parent families, more than half (47/74) were unemployed

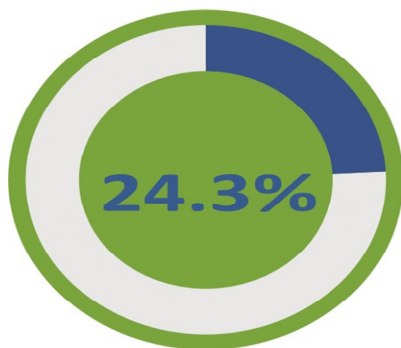
According to the *Montgomery County Early Care and Education Strategic Plan*, four out of ten of Montgomery County’s young children are economically vulnerable living below 300% of the federal poverty level. Almost 7,000 children under age 6 in the county live at or below the Federal Poverty Level.

Self-Sufficiency Standard

MMF’s most recent *Demographic Snapshot* released in fall 2016 notes that the cost of living in Montgomery County is the highest in Maryland and among the highest in the nation. Cost of housing in the county increased 62% from 2001 to 2014. According to the *Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Report* released in January 2018, a family with two adults, one preschooler and one infant need \$105,925 per year to cover the basic costs of childcare, housing, food, transportation, health care, taxes, and miscellaneous, such as clothing, etc. This number represents 304% of the January 2020 Federal Poverty Level. Housing, childcare and food accounted for more than half of the expenses with childcare exceeding the cost of housing by more than \$1,000 per month. It is becoming increasingly more difficult for low-income families to be able to afford to live in Montgomery County. Fig.3 below offers an insight with respect to the cost of childcare in relation to a family’s income, in comparison to the average national expected standard.

Child care for family’s income.

Montgomery County for a family of 4 with one infant and one preschool infant requires 24.3%



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services cites that child care costs exceeding 7% of family’s income are unaffordable.

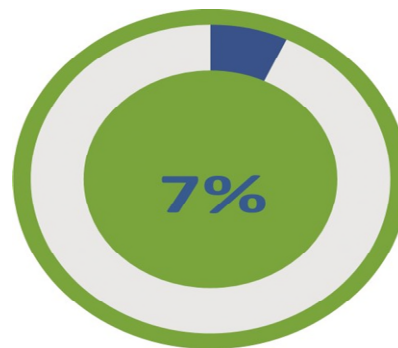


Fig 3. Adapted from Montgomery County Early Care & Education Initiative Action Plan 2020

The statistics in Fig.3 clearly illustrate that the cost of maintaining childcare in Montgomery is more than three times higher than the average stipulated by the U.S. Department and Human Services. The remarkably high cost of living in Montgomery is a major contributing factor for many families living in poverty, and thus also many children affected in this regard.

The Point-in-Time Survey for January 2017 indicated that 894 people were experiencing homelessness on any given day in Montgomery County. Demand for housing assistance far exceeds supply with nearly 32,100 county residents having affirmed their need for housing assistance through the Housing Path wait list of the Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County (HOC) (*Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission* <http://www.hocmc.org/>). Closing the housing affordability gap for Montgomery County families remains a challenge. Limits on public funding enable HOC to serve just a portion of these residents through the administration of 6,896 Housing Choice Vouchers and the provision of 6,904 units. Likewise, limited funding for DHHS Services to End and Prevent Homelessness (SEPH) prevent this program from serving more residents. For example, the Rental Assistance Program, which provides \$200 in support per month, served 1,688 households per month in FY16 but had a waiting list of 1,946 households as of February 2017 (*Montgomery County Housing First Plan Implementation Status Update April 2017*). During the height of the pandemic, the COVID-19 Rent Relief Program provided short-term rental assistance to eligible households who have experienced lost income due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has caused them to fall behind on their rent. The program was managed by the County's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) with funding from the Department of Treasury's Emergency Rental Assistance Program. While funds were available, the program provided up to \$12,000 to eligible households to pay for back rent owed and/or pay for up to three months of future rent (<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/SNHS/rent-relief.html>).

Snapshot of Early Childhood Services

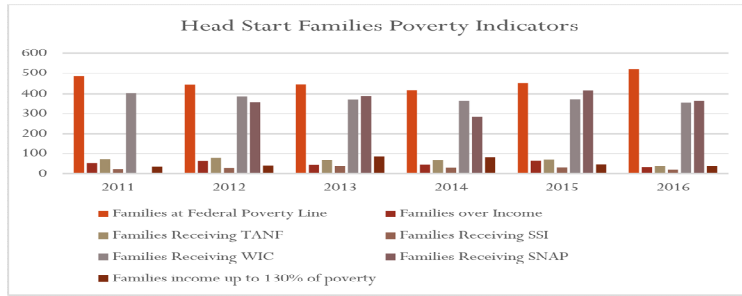
FSI EHS works in partnership with diverse early childhood partners in Montgomery County to support healthy child development and school readiness opportunities from 0-5 years old. The leaders of Montgomery County's early education programs demonstrate a strong commitment to coordinating services and advocating for those young children who are experiencing an achievement gap prior to kindergarten enrollment. However, the need to close the achievement gap with quality, affordable and full day programs for all children at risk remains very high.

Montgomery County Head Start and Pre-K

According to the *Community Action Agency Community Needs Assessment*, during the FY2018-19 program year, Montgomery County Head Start was funded to serve 648 children and their families. Montgomery County Public School's Head Start/PreK program provided direct services

for a total of 714 Head Start-enrolled children and an additional 2285 Prekindergarten eligible children of which approximately 795 were also eligible for Head Start services. There are approximately 1,600 children eligible for Head Start living in the County. Montgomery County Head Start is currently serving 40.5% of all Head Start eligible children.

Montgomery County Head Start provides comprehensive services in a center-based option model. The program is located in 30 Montgomery County Public Schools throughout the County with a total of 34 classrooms. During the 2018-19 program year, 83.3% of children were enrolled in center-based full day classes (5 days per week, 6 hours per day) and 16.6% of children were enrolled in center-based part day classes (5 days per week, 3.5 hours per day). The racial and linguistic make-up of the children enrolled in Montgomery County Head Start has remained consistent over the past five years, with Hispanic/Latino families being the highest number of enrolled children and Spanish being the second highest primary home language after English. Montgomery County Head Start enrolled families include recent immigrants from Central and South America, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. For a better understanding of the necessity of Head-Start and its specific purpose, it is imperative to present an overview of the poverty indicators and family needs of the eligible families. Fig. 4 below graphically and statistically illustrates these poverty indicators and family needs.



	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Families at Federal Poverty Line	446	447	419	453	521
Families over Income	64	48	49	65	34
Families Receiving TANF	81	69	68	74	42
Families Receiving SSI	30	41	31	32	22
Families Receiving WIC	390	371	365	372	352
Families Receiving SNAP	354	391	286	418	365
Families income up to 130% of poverty	45	86	83	50	42

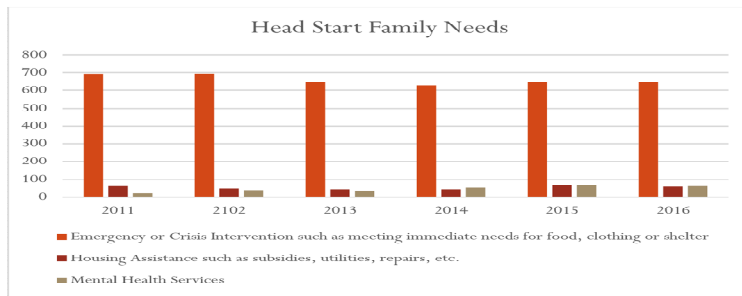


Fig. 4 Adapted from Montgomery County Head Start Community Assessment 2017 by Community Action Partnership-**Couldn't find anything more recent.**

The indicator of families at the Federal Poverty Line is consistently high and is complemented by the necessity for Emergency or Crisis Intervention for the families eligible for the Head Start. These indicators speak to the greater vulnerability of the eligible families. Considering that Head Start is currently serving less than half (40.5%) of all Head Start eligible children, continued effort, resources and initiatives are needed to improve childcare and education in Montgomery.

FSI EHS has a Transition Agreement with MCPS to support the transition of children into Head Start. According to this agreement, each year the Head Start program conducts onsite Head Start/Pre-K registration for children transitioning out of the EHS program and information is shared, with parental consent, to facilitate the transition. However, due to the limited three-year-old slots in Head Start, most EHS families are not able to transition directly into Head Start.

GAITHERSBURG JUDY CENTER

The Gaithersburg Judy Center (GJC) is a state funded program that is administered by MCPS serving families in the Summit Hall and Washington Grove Elementary school catchment areas, with the goal of promoting school readiness. Judy Centers throughout the state develop collaborative partnerships and support high quality program access for families with children from 0-5 years old through the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). The GJC provides enrichment activities for kindergarten children, parent-child activities for all families, parent education and support for children to attend high quality childcare, Head Start, Pre-K and Kindergarten classes. The GJC partners with childcare programs to offer limited slots for families in the catchment area who are unable to receive childcare subsidies from the state or county. FSI EHS has an MOU with the Gaithersburg Judy Center that supports program development, services and transition of eligible children enrolled in both programs. **-Removed info on accreditation.**

MONTGOMERY COUNTY INFANTS AND TODDLERS

The Montgomery County Infants and Toddlers Program is the local system of early intervention services for children birth through thirty-four and a half months of age and their families. When an infant or toddler is suspected of having a developmental delay, a referral is made to the program. Children are eligible if they meet the following criteria: demonstrate a 25% delay in one of the developmental areas, have atypical development or have a high probability condition that would likely result in developmental delays. The program includes a developmental assessment; a review of family concerns; priorities and resources; meetings with the family to develop an individualized family service plan; service coordination to ensure that the individual and his or her family receive needed services which may include but are not limited to physical therapy, occupational therapy, audiology, health/medical services, nursing services, nutrition services, psychological services including specialized play groups or therapy sessions, counseling, speech and language assistance, special instructional services, transportation, and parenting skills development; and ongoing evaluation of the child's progress and his or her changing enrichment needs. These services are provided in a family centered practice model where families participate with service providers to learn skills and strategies to support their children's development. All services are provided at no cost. **-This is what's on the website.** <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Program.aspx?id=CYP/CYFInfantToddlerPgm-p223.html>

FAMILY DISCOVERY CENTER

FSI operates the Family Discovery Center (FDC), one of 26 Family Support Centers in the state, under contract with the Maryland Family Network. The multi-generational center promotes adult learning and healthy child development for families with children from 0-3 years old. The FDC offers ESOL classes as well as parenting, career development, health workshops and child development. **-Updated 0-3 and took out GED classes.**

HEALTHY FAMILIES MONTGOMERY

FSI operates Healthy Families Montgomery (HFM), a nationally accredited home visiting services for first time parents facing multiple stressors, with the goal of preventing child abuse and neglect. Home based services begin before the baby is born and continue for 6 months or up to 3 years. Emphasis is placed on health care, child development, parenting support and family self-sufficiency. HFM has an MOU with the county Health Department to receive referrals for this voluntary program in addition to HFM providing referrals to EHS (such as teen parents and families in need of childcare services).

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Services

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Services teams a mental health professional with licensed early care and education providers and with families. Through the development of these partnerships, the program builds the capacity of ECE providers to understand the influence of relationships and interactions on young children's social and emotional development. Individualized strategies are developed to create positive environments and foster nurturing interactions that will reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviors. By working together, children are ready for school and the risk of expulsions are reduced.

Child Care Needs and Quality

Data reported in MMF's *Early Care and Education Trends, and Key Factors* (January 2018) continues to highlight a tremendous strain on families and employers resulting from a lack of affordable quality childcare options. Additional challenges families face due to the gap in services for 3-year-old children were underscored in this survey. As stated in the report, **when** parents don't have access to affordable childcare, it directly affects their ability to participate in the workforce, and that in turn affects employers. Some parents who would like to work are simply unable to do so. The desire to pursue career paths and higher education can be curtailed because childcare is too expensive and/or not available.

The *Early Care and Education Trends and Key Factors* report shows that for many of the areas served by EHS Discovery Station, there are 2.3 children aged 2-4 and 5.5 children aged 0-23 months for each available slot offered by regulated childcare providers in the county. Parents surveyed through the LOCATE: Child Care program report cost of childcare as the number one reason for not finding childcare in Montgomery County, followed by location, then location and no vacancies for infants. According to the *Child Care in Montgomery County* report, there are approximately 10 children for every regulated slot available for children under 2 years old.

Locating care for children with special needs can be even more challenging. EHS Discovery Station served 43 children with special needs during PY20. According to the *Child Care Demographics 2021: Montgomery County Report* only 41% of family childcare providers and

61% of childcare centers in Montgomery County served children with special needs. The EHS Discovery Station Parent Interest Survey for PY20 to date, more than half of the parents (53%) identified “accessing quality childcare” as an area where they need additional support. Locating quality early childhood programs for children aging out of Early Head Start continues to be a challenge as well. There are approximately 60 Head Start slots available for 3-year-olds in a County of over 1 million residents. Limited subsidies and the high cost of childcare are prohibitive for many families in accessing a high-quality early childhood learning environment. For that reason, many families end up placing their children in unlicensed childcare situations where the quality and safety of the care is unregulated. In 2013 according to IRS filings, there were 2,595 non-employer establishments in the childcare service industry, nearly three times the number of regulated Family Child Care Homes (*Early Care and Education Trends and Key Factors*).

In Maryland there are several quality indicators that childcare programs can obtain such as state or national accreditation or a higher check level in Maryland EXCELS, the state’s Quality Rating Improvement System. Typically, programs that have these quality indicators tend to have a higher cost than programs that do not participate. Even without the restriction of cost, access to a regulated childcare program that has been accredited or deemed high-quality is challenging. In general, the number of regulated childcare programs have decreased, particularly Family Child Care Programs (FCCP). In 2020 there were 819 FCCP in Montgomery County. Out of the 819 FCCP, it is predicted to only be 674 FCCP by 2025 according to the *Child Care Demographics 2021: Montgomery County Report*.

Child Care Cost and Subsidies

Bill 28-17, enacted in November 2017, phases in increases to the County’s minimum wage so that by 2024 the minimum wage for all businesses operating in the County will be \$15 an hour (*Economic Indicators for Montgomery County and Surrounding Jurisdictions, January 2022, Montgomery County Council*).

Although this is a step forward, according to the *Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Report* a family with one parent, one preschooler and one school-aged child spends approximately \$1,929 a month for childcare in Montgomery County, \$181 more than on housing. For a family with two adults, a preschooler, and an infant, 31% of the monthly Self-Sufficiency Standard goes towards childcare compared to 20% spent on housing. According to the *Early Care and Education Trends and Key Factors*, a year of childcare for a young child cost more than in-state tuition at a public university. A single mother making \$58,000 would spend 50% of her income on care for an infant and a 4-year-old. The median cost of care at a childcare center for an infant and 4-year-old would be \$30,000.

In July 2020, there were 2,678 children in Montgomery County participating in the Child Care Subsidy Program according to the *Child Care Demographics 2021: Montgomery County Report*. There were 112 family childcare providers and 139 childcare centers serving WPA children in 2020. In FY20 Montgomery County allocated \$27,426,288 plus an addition \$6,715,442 (April, May & June 2020 aggregate) due to COVID for the Child Care Subsidy Program.

Based on most the most recent data, a monthly average of 691 children received WPA in 2016. That equates to less than half (46%) of the children under 5 living below the Federal Poverty level as receiving childcare subsidies. The FY16 WPA rate for a family of four was 265% of the Federal Poverty level, still falling well below what is required for Self-Sufficiency Standards. Many families are unable to afford childcare even when receiving subsidies as they are unable to pay the mandated copay let alone any additional costs associated. There are approximately 13.7 eligible children for every subsidized child receiving Child Care Subsidy and 44.1 eligible children for every subsidized child receiving WPA.

In 2016, Montgomery County revised their local childcare subsidies program, Working Parents Assistance (WPA), to provide higher reimbursement for childcare and include families with higher level incomes, to better reflect the cost of living in the community. In 2017, WPA received an additional \$1 million from the County Council. According to the *Montgomery County Department of Health & Human Services Annual Report*, the increase in funding provided an additional 556 children with WPA vouchers and 555 children with supplemental vouchers to the State Child Care Subsidy program.

In August 2018, the Maryland State Child Care Subsidy program renamed itself the Child Care Scholarship (CCS) Program. New income guidelines were released which significantly increased the income limits for all families, in some cases doubling the income cap. Previously the eligibility guidelines for a family of four was \$35,702, under the new guidelines the income eligibility for a family of four is \$71,525. Maryland will continue to increase subsidy reimbursement rates over the next ten years. This change in income eligibility will result in the majority of families currently receiving WPA to be eligible under the Child Care Scholarship Program, most likely with higher voucher amounts. Changes in the WPA are still under review.

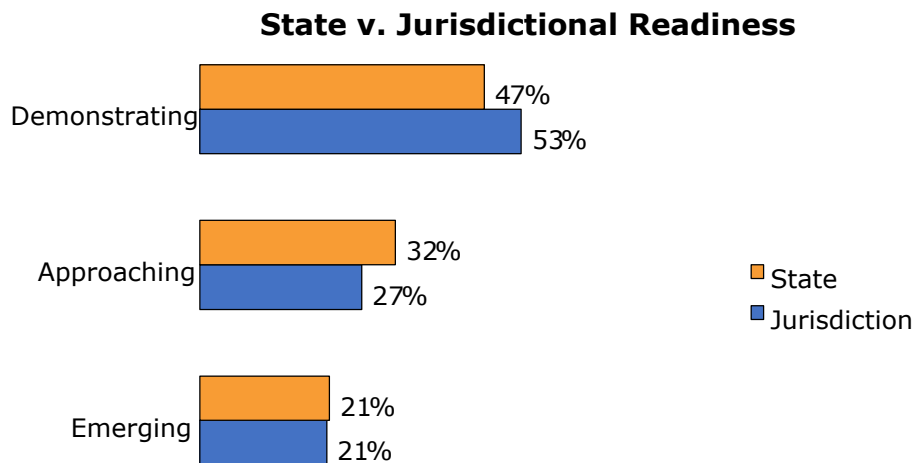
School Readiness Data

Each year the Maryland State Department of Education releases its *Readiness Matters* report in partnership with Ready at Five. The data is based on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment administered to incoming kindergarten students each fall. The report highlights the importance of quality early childhood education experiences for children to prepare them for the demands of school as achievement gaps start early.

Due to the virtual start of the school year in all local school systems, it was not possible to appropriately administer the state Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) in the fall of 2020-2021. Instead of reporting on kindergarten readiness, Ready at Five chose to take the opportunity to find out how the early learning community responded to the impacts of the pandemic which is outlined in the “Additional Areas: COVID-19” section below.

In 2019, of the children assessed, 53% of Montgomery County kindergarten students demonstrated overall readiness compared to 47% for Maryland. This is an increase from 47% for Montgomery County and 45% for Maryland in 2018. Fig. 5 below shows the state versus jurisdictional statistics – Maryland versus Montgomery County:

School Readiness in Montgomery County JURISDICTIONAL READINESS



READINESS
MATTERS

Fig 5. Adapted from Readiness Matters 2019-2020

Although the Montgomery County marginally edged its state in terms of readiness, 53% is just over half of children ready for kindergarten; the remaining 47% is a major source of concern. While there are perennial factors against readiness for school, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the rate of unpreparedness.

The average scores for the different learning domains were similar with Physical Well-Being & Motor Development being the highest and Language & Literacy the lowest. There are significant disparities among racial and ethnic groups demonstrating readiness:

- 31% of Hispanic/Latino students
- 52% of African American students
- 64% of students reporting two or more races
- 63% of Asian students
- 75% of White students

There are also alarming gaps that exist between other demographic subgroups:

- 22-point gap between children from low-income households who are “direct certified” (33%) when compared with children from mid-/high-income households (55%)
- 38-point gap between English Language Learners (24%) and English Proficient children (62%)
- 46-point gap between children with disabilities (12%) and children without disabilities (58%)

Additional Areas of Concern

Immigration Policies: Montgomery County Police have a policy directive not to ask for information on the status of immigrants who report a crime or need assistance. However, during the previous presidential administration in 2019, the Departments of State (DOS) and Homeland Security (DHS) promulgated regulations that dramatically changed the meaning and application of the public charge ground of inadmissibility (<https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Public-Charge-What-Advocates-Need-to-Know-Now.pdf>). Despite the County’s efforts to reassure the community, enrolled families were extremely fearful, and families became more isolated. Families were hesitant to access services such as Early Head Start and Head Start, WIC, TANF, Infants and Toddlers Program and other available services.

In March of 2021, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) published a final rule that removed its 2019 public charge regulations from the Federal Register. These changes, which implement USCIS’ reinstatement of the 1999 field guidance, went into effect possibly easing deportation fears.

Strained Resources: Although Montgomery County offers more services for families and children than most other jurisdictions in Maryland, the severity and intensity of their needs is on the rise. This combined with the continued influx of new immigrants demonstrating a new variety of challenging needs is putting a strain on resources that are already stretched thin. Many programs such as the Judy Centers, Child Care Subsidies, Working Parents Assistance, including the local Early Head Start programs, are carrying a waiting list. MCPS’s Head Start program does not carry a waitlist, but many children who are eligible for are placed in a half-day prekindergarten classroom as opposed to a full-day Head Start class due to the limited spaces available. Funding and government hiring freezes continue to affect the ability of currently existing programs to serve children and families as well. These already strained resources have been stretched even thinner due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic outlined below.

COVID-19

The client population of Discovery Station Early Head Start is ethnically and racially diverse; low income and presents a range of personal life challenges and trauma. The individuals and communities served have been disproportionately impacted by the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Through the intersectionality of lost wages, low-income with few assets to fall back upon; issues around documentation, citizenship, and housing; structural racism; and, histories of

poor health, mental health challenges, and intra-family stress, the pandemic has compounded existing crises. Discovery Station Early Head Start serves a high percentage of immigrant families, many of whom are ineligible for public resources that require citizenship or other necessary proof of residency. All of these factors increase family stress adding to challenges that are often associated with child abuse and maltreatment. Some of the greatest areas of need are the wider Gaithersburg region.

With the onset of the pandemic, Maryland's early learning leaders, providers, and families quickly shifted to virtual instruction and launched protective measures to ensure safe childcare. The first confirmed positive COVID-19 case in Maryland was identified at the end of March. At that point, Governor Larry Hogan and State Superintendent Dr. Karen Salmon had already made the determination to close schools for two weeks. What followed was an immediate and unprecedented switch to universal online learning throughout the state for the remainder of the school year. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the educational landscape in Maryland and caused a dramatic shift in the early learning community.

Once it became clear that schools would not be reopening for in-person instruction for the remainder of the school year, local school systems were asked to develop reopening plans that relied on community health metrics and input from health professionals, school leaders, teachers, staff, and parents, to determine the best methods for safely and responsibly bringing teachers and children back to school.

Maryland quickly mobilized to create the Essential Personnel Child Care (EPCC) and Essential Personnel School Age (EPSA) programs, allowing childcare programs and local youth-serving organizations that could meet certain staff/child ratios and enforce strict cleaning and protective strategies to reopen and provide care for children of essential personnel. Essential personnel were defined as “employees whose duties are of such a nature as to require the employee to report for work or remain at the work site to continue agency operations during an emergency situation (*State of Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: Essential Employee Definition*).”

Family and center-based childcare programs faced significant challenges when dealing with the pandemic and its effects. Programs that opened to serve children of essential personnel had to meet increased restrictions on the number of children and staff allowed. Providers had to encourage children to wear masks and practice social distancing, modify the environment to create additional spaces for small groups, and increase their health and safety procedures. The costs associated with these mandated requirements, along with sharp decreases in tuition revenue, created significant economic challenges for the providers. They also struggled with widespread shortages of available personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies that were necessary to operate safely. Additionally, as COVID-19 cases increased over time, providers needed to develop concrete plans for communicating with families and staff and addressing instances when children showed signs of illness (*Meeting the Challenge: Maryland's Early Learning Response to COVID-19 (Ready at Five, 2020)*). Currently in Montgomery County, there are 1,252 operating childcare programs in which 94 closed since the beginning of the pandemic (March 2020) and programs are operating at an average of 40% enrollment.

Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic was causing an unprecedented financial hardship for many Montgomery County residents, the Emergency Assistance Relief Payment (EARP) program was created (by Montgomery County) to provide immediate financial assistance to households in need. The program sought to fill the gaps for those who were not eligible or did not benefit directly from the federal or state COVID-19 aid. To be eligible, an individual/family had to have an income equal to or less than 50 percent of the Federal Poverty Level and be in need relief for food and essentials. Four organizations (including Family Services, Inc.) teamed up with the County to help with the structure, organization, and acceptance of applications. According to the *Montgomery County, July 14th EARP Private Pay Report*, in total \$505,363 was issued through EARP. Out of that, Family Services, Inc. assisted with \$125,023 to 183 households with 607 household members with an average payment of \$683 (*Montgomery County, July 14th EARP Private Pay Report*).

The County's unemployment rate had spiked to 6.7 percent in 2020, the first year of the pandemic, but then retreated to 4.9 percent in 2021, a significant decrease but still above the pre-pandemic rate of 2.9 percent in 2019. Workplace employment dropped by 5.3 percent from 2019 to 2020 as the pandemic prompted the loss of more than 38,000 County jobs.

The seven indicators in the category of Low-Wage Industry Sectors and Occupational Groups show large reductions in the number of jobs by occupational group in Montgomery County from April 2020 to April 2021, as the effects of pandemic hit the local economy. Department of Labor and Licensing Regulation (DLLR) data for Montgomery County show losses of 5,590 Food Preparation jobs (down 22.6 percent), 1,930 Building and Grounds and Cleaning and Maintenance jobs (down 11.7 percent) and 2,910 Personal Care and Service jobs (down 20.3 percent). Nonetheless, the same data set shows that entry level and median wages for these occupational groups increased over the same time period in Montgomery County. Hourly entry wages increased by \$0.38 per hour (3.4 percent) for Food Preparation jobs; by \$0.65 per hour (up 5.5 percent) for Building and Grounds and Cleaning and Maintenance jobs; and by \$0.53 per hour (or 4.7 percent) for Personal Care and Service jobs (*Economic Indicators for Montgomery County and Surrounding Jurisdictions, January 2022, Montgomery County Council*).

With 85,925 confirmed cases and 1,685 deaths in Montgomery County, vaccination continues to be the one of the best strategies for combating COVID-19. There are currently 1,043,057 (95%) residents who have received their first vaccine dose with 883,258 (84%) residents who are considered fully vaccinated. In addition, 445,494 (50%) of residents have received the booster shot (*Montgomery County Government, COVID-19 Information Portal*). With the ongoing impacts of COVID and rolling restrictions and closures as new variances such as Omicron emerge, the community works to respond. This includes but not limited to providing more testing locations, at home test and increasing the availability of locations for vaccination.

Conclusion

Strategic Opportunities

The population that Discovery Station EHS serves continues to face challenges in accessing quality early childhood programs, especially for 3-year olds. At the same time, Montgomery County is engaging in multiple efforts to involve all stakeholders and policymakers in addressing key early care and education issues. This effort provides new opportunities for EHS to:

- Advocate for increased opportunities for 3-year-olds in the implementation of the County's strategic plan.
- Strengthen transition agreements with Head Start and other early childhood programs.
- EHS Program Director will continue to participate in conversations with Head Start and other local programs to advocate for more 3-year-old Head Start slots to be available for Early Head Start families transitioning out of the program.
- Participate in the Montgomery Moving Forward collective action process to demonstrate the positive impact of comprehensive supports and quality childcare for vulnerable infants and toddlers.
- Share data and empower families to share their stories directly with policymakers.

Addressing Immigration Concerns

Of continued focus are the immigration concerns that impact many enrolled families. These fears must be addressed effectively to support family well-being, a foundation for healthy child development and learning. EHS will need to partner with immigration experts and other community programs that provide support to immigrant families. It will also need to ensure that staff is competent and well supported to address these sensitive issues effectively both through home visiting and in the center. Staff will utilize a Trauma Informed Care approach when interacting with families as many have experienced traumatic events when immigrating to the country. In addition, we continue to focus on family engagement to provide opportunities to bring families together to reduce isolation. This year parent participation in the Policy Council and Parent Committees has increased in part due to the Policy Council Chair who is bilingual and conducts all meetings in both English and Spanish to facilitate access for all parents.

Meeting Program and Community Needs

Based on parent surveys and feedback, community and conversations with staff, parents and stakeholders there is a high need for understanding child development, nutrition and discipline. These categories represented most of the responses of parent interest during the enrollment and application process. Parents who indicated interest in any of these areas will be given the opportunity to receive information individually as well as in a group format. It is a part of Discovery Station's mission to ensure that parents are guided, well informed, and driven to make a change based on their interest and needs.

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Discovery Station continued to provide health consultations and trainings which included: COVID-19 signs and symptoms, safety precautions, testing, and vaccine information along with updated resources from the Montgomery County MD Health Department.

Strategic Opportunities

Recommendations in the *Strategic Plan for Early Care and Education in Montgomery County* have been funded. EHS will focus on building its capacity to provide services for diverse families, helping families apply for subsidy and building partnerships and strengthen transition agreements. This includes partnering with the Community Action Agency, part of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services to provide more Early Head Start slots in the community.

Additionally, the Discovery Station Child Development center completed its final MSDE Accreditation visit on March 8, 2019, and was awarded accreditation on April 9, 2019. The current accreditation is valid until April 30, 2022. Currently, the Discovery Station Child Development center is at a Level-4 and will continue the process of accreditation at the highest level possible. Because of COVID-19, MSDE allowed an extension for programs until December 30, 2022, for programs that re-applied prior to December 30, 2021, in which Discovery Station has.

In addition, Discovery Station is partnering with the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to the Office of Head Start for the Early Head Start Expansion Grant. Discovery Station will provide Family Engagement services and support by assisting DHHS in proposal budgeting and the development of family and community engagement, conduct the hiring of three full time Family Advocates and a part time Family Advocate Supervisor and assist with the Montgomery County Community Action Board (CAB). Once fully awarded, the delivery of these services by Discovery Station will include the construction of two-three-year-old classrooms on site of the Discovery Station campus.



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