

**Court Watch Montgomery Testimony
in support of Monitored Child Exchange & Supervised Visitation Center funding**

Montgomery County Council budget hearing, April 5, 2017

Court Watch Montgomery urges the Montgomery County Council to fully fund the County's first Monitored Child Exchange and Supervised Visitation Center in the FY 18 budget. We ask that you add funds to Mr. Leggett's line item of \$250,000 to create a viable program that protects children and their abused parent from further physical or emotional abuse. Additional funds are needed to keep the center open at least 24 hours each week so that the families in desperate need of this service can access its important services and so that as many judges as possible will order the Center's use.

Based on national data, over 100,000 Montgomery County residents are expected to experience intimate partner violence in their lifetimes. Approximately 3,000 victims currently experiencing violence request a protective order from our courts. These survivors are only a small percentage of those experiencing violence. Of the over 500 protective order cases that Court Watch Montgomery volunteers monitor each year, approximately 75% of the parties in protective order cases have children. We believe that more domestic violence victims will seek protective orders once they know that their children will be protected during visitation.

Domestic violence victims generally need one very simple thing to stay safe. It is the aim of 99% of domestic violence victims when they walk into court seeking a protective order. What victims need to survive and thrive is "no contact" with their abuser.

Tragically, when a parent walks into any Montgomery County courthouse on any given day and asks for a comprehensive "no-contact" protective order they almost never receive it. With extremely few exceptions, judges make a horrific and shortsighted exception to "no contact." Most judges actually *require* victims of domestic violence to meet their abuser in unsecured locations such as McDonald's parking lots or empty police department lots to turn over their children for unsafe visits. Many judges do so because there are no county facilities providing safe exchanges or supervised visits.

Councilmembers may ask why, in a year when all departments are being asked to make cuts, a new program should be funded, and funded above the County Executive's recommended amount. Our first monitored child exchange and supervised visitation center will literally save lives, help stop the cycle of violence, and help our most vulnerable residents get back on their feet and be productive students and adults. That is an expenditure we cannot afford *not* to make. This is the time to acknowledge that we have a gaping hole in the Montgomery County domestic violence safety net and to fix it.

Opening a monitored exchange and safe visitation center is only the first critical step. If judges do not require families to use the center, we will have failed. Judges are unlikely to order families to use a center if it is not open a sufficient number of hours at convenient times, since many judges are hesitant

to put an undue burden on families. We believe that funds should be allocated that allow the center to be open for a minimum of 24 hours each week of exchanges & supervised visits. Having the center open for at least 24 hours of services will mean that exchanges and/or supervised visits will be available one night during the week, Friday evening, and both Saturday and Sunday from 9 am to 5 pm.

By fully funding a monitored child exchange and supervised visitation center you will protect the County's most vulnerable residents, enable children and abused adults to begin the healing process, empower victims to move toward self-sufficiency, and provide abusive parents the opportunity to maintain contact with their children, and learn parenting skills and de-escalation techniques.

Submitted by Laurie Duker
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