

**Baltimore County Commission on Disabilities
January 18, 2023, Virtual Meeting via Webex
Minutes**

Attending: Ben Dubin, Mike Bullis, David Bycoff, John Bryan, Shakima Davey, Carla Demondonca, Jay Doyle, Drew Emmer, Julie Gaynor, David Greenberg, Terry Hickey, Monica Lijewski, Terri Parrish, Mary Scott, Michael Tan, Russ Weber

Commission Chair Terri Parrish introduced Terry Hickey, director of the county Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD).

Mr. Hickey noted that DHCD will be engaging with the Commission on Veterans Affairs.

Mr. Hickey stated that his report would focus on a package of housing legislation (four bills) that was announced by County Executive Johnny Olszewski on January 12, 2023 (<https://www.baltimorecountymd.gov/county-news/2023/01/12/olszewski-announces-foundational-housing-reform-legislative-package>) and introduced to the Council on January 17.

The legislation seeks to expand access to housing and represents a significant step forward in implementing the recommendations of the county executive’s housing task force. Housing can be a contentious issue; efforts involving relationship building and education with the County Council and the community at large are still needed. Housing is limited in Baltimore County.

Under the Voluntary Conciliation Agreement senior housing was not given a high priority because of its past emphasis. However, the need for this housing stock persists and is growing, including accessibility features.

A summary of the bills:

- **Establishing a dedicated and permanent Baltimore County Housing Opportunities Fund** to allow for re-occurring investment to support the ongoing development, rehabilitation, and preservation of affordable and attainable housing. This funding can be used for a wide variety of approaches to development, including revitalization and re-purposing of under-performing properties, sites. As proposed, the fund will be seeded with dollars established through the VCA and receive \$16 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds. In the future, private investment may be a component of the fund
- **Modernizing new townhome construction** to create additional housing opportunities aimed at residents who may be priced out of the current housing market. This bill would change the minimum width of townhomes from 20’ to 16’. This change represents a benefit to certain builders and will be deployed with affordability requirements. This benefit is expected to enhance opportunities to create more accessible housing.

- **Updating the County’s regulations to expand family-member use of accessory apartments** (accessory dwelling units or “ADUs”) to increase opportunities to keep families together and allow older adults more opportunities to age in place. Present regulations are very restrictive. The bill would allow ADU residents to pay rent.
- **Creating Baltimore’s County first-ever process to designate properties as “vacant,”** serving as the foundation for future efforts to convert blighted and abandoned properties into housing, including homeownership opportunities;

DHCD is examining options for legislation to allow for more effective land-banking.

Mike Bullis commented that many people would benefit from being able to establish an ADU without a family relationship, and that the currently proposed legislation would not address that circumstance.

Mr. Hickey said that ADUs are an active issue among governments, the subject of legislative proposals.

Mary Scott expressed her enthusiasm for the legislation. Ms. Scott asked about the demographic profile of households receiving housing vouchers and noted that some stereotypes can be dispelled through this information. Ms. Scott asked if DHCD personnel are available to speak to communities about housing. Mr. Hickey said that DHCD staff can speak at community meetings.

Terri Parrish introduced Drew Emmer, chief, capital planning and development for the county Department of Recreation and Parks.

Mr. Emmer noted that the acting director for Recreation and Parks is now Bob Smith, who supports accessibility initiatives.

With regards to destination playgrounds, efforts are underway at Sparrows Point Park (now in permitting) and at the Banneker facility in Catonsville. Mr. Emmer stated that he would have more information to present at a future meeting.

About 18 smaller-scale playgrounds are in the works. A key priority is to establish accessible paths to and within parks/park facilities. The department is preparing a Request for Proposals (RFP) to retain the services of a design firm that would evaluate accessibility conditions at all county park sites. A prioritized list of projects would be created.

At this time, a project to improve accessibility at Rocky Point Park is underway. Recreation and Parks is looking at alternatives to wood for certain walking path surfaces to reduce falls, trip hazards and slipping.

Mr. Emmer encouraged Commission members to attend county town hall events and advocate for park improvements that enhance accessibility.

Ben Dubin kicked-off the roundtable conversation with nonprofit representatives, suggesting these topics: *Discuss your organization's top priorities for 2023 and what do you hope to accomplish; Discuss challenges and opportunities that your organization is dealing with now, and challenges and opportunities that may evolve as 2023 unfolds; What are the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations of your organization? Are COVID-19 impacts over, resolved; What should the Commission, and the general public, understand about how nonprofit providers are operating now? Looking forward, what issues should the Commission and the general public understand, be aware of, concerning the delivery of services and equitable opportunities for people with disabilities?*

David Greenberg spoke on behalf of the League for People with Disabilities. Mr. Greenberg noted that The League will strive to meet its hiring demands. The League will strive to improve branding and awareness. Presently a major parking lot project is underway.

Direct support professionals who perform the front-line work in serving people with disabilities need better wages, perhaps \$25 per hour. Virtual programming that evolved during the pandemic should remain an option for all programs. The general public would benefit from a better understanding of integrated employment and community settings for people with disabilities.

Mike Bullis, on behalf of the Image Center, spoke of challenges in hiring and providing adequate pay to employees. Labor costs have risen. The Image Center has been able to expand its scope of services and activities in recent times. Echoing comments made by Mr. Greenberg, many individuals/households eligible for service go unserved due to limited resources.

Michael Tan, speaking on behalf of the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), noted that enrollment for the single-step program is strong. Interactions with Baltimore County Public Schools are enhanced through opportunities for virtual meetings. CCBC faces the challenge of hiring well-qualified instructors. Remote, virtual instruction is here to stay. Students living outside the U.S. can participate in CCBC programs virtually. Our business has bounced back from the pandemic and grown.

Russell Weber, speaking on behalf of Keypoint Health, said that he concurs with the need to pursue better wages for staff, a living wage, with \$25 per hour representing a reasonable target. The demand for our services is strong. Mr. Weber supports the hybrid work model that allows some time working from home. Keypoint is expanding its housing program.

Ben Dubin suggested that the Commission continue to follow state budgets and legislation and look for opportunities to advocate for higher wages for front-line staff personnel serving people with disabilities.

Mary Scott offered a consumer's point of view as an advocate for a man who needs services. Ms. Scott stated that the pandemic caused a disruption in the delivery of service and that the service provide was not able to re-start the service. Ms. Scott was unable to find an alternative provider who would take on a new client.