



# Montgomery County Council

---

*From the Office of Councilmember Nancy Navarro*

*Sept. 29, 2016*

---

Contact: Sonya Healy 240-777-7926

## **Montgomery's Children's Opportunity Fund initiated by Councilmember Navarro selects leadership team and creates new partnership**

*New executive director, Community Foundation  
representatives and steering committee establish  
strategic framework to help children and families*

**N  
E  
W  
S  
  
R  
E  
L  
E  
A  
S  
E**

ROCKVILLE, Md., Sept. 29, 2016—Montgomery County Councilmember Nancy Navarro today applauded the progress made by community partners and public policy leaders to create the professional structure needed to fully implement the mission of the Children's Opportunity Fund (COF) in the County. Mala B. Thakur began work as executive director on June 27; a key partnership has been established with the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region; and new members have been appointed to the COF Steering Committee.

The overarching goal of the COF is to champion, plan and fund strategic investments that improve the lives of children and families in the County with a focus on innovative, evidence-based efforts targeted at closing the opportunity gap.

In 2014, Councilmember Navarro created the Children's Opportunity Fund as a mechanism to ensure a long-term, strategic approach and a dedicated funding stream for early childhood education and interventions aimed at closing the achievement gap. In Fiscal Year 2016, at Councilmember Navarro's request, County Executive Ike Leggett earmarked \$250,000 in the Department of Health and Human Services' budget and the Council approved it as part of the budget process. Montgomery County Public Schools also provided \$125,000. Funding for the COF was increased to \$375,000 in FY17.

In addition to support from the County, private funds are necessary to meet the long-term goals of the COF and the growing need for services. The COF leadership team will seek private funding to support the fund and leverage County resources.

“I am delighted with the progress that has been made so far and excited about the new leadership that will guide the operations of the COF because there is much work we need to do on behalf of our County’s children,” said Councilmember Navarro, who chairs the Council’s Government Operations and Fiscal Policy Committee and is a member of its Education Committee. “Partnering with the Community Foundation, having Ms. Thakur as executive director of the COF and convening a talented steering committee will enable us to grow this initiative so that all of our children will have the opportunity to thrive.”

“This is an important initiative and I fully support it,” said County Executive Leggett. “I look forward to the progress we make as a community in closing the achievement gap.”

Ms. Thakur said she plans to focus on the COF’s three goals: identifying priority areas for investment based on unmet need; aligning resources toward effective inter-agency collaborations serving the County’s most vulnerable youth and their families; and seeking new funding sources for innovative evidence-based efforts targeting interventions that help to close the achievement gap.

Ms. Thakur has spent her career building coalitions, developing policies and identifying practices that support comprehensive approaches to closing the achievement gap and expanding opportunities for underserved populations. Before joining the COF, Ms. Thakur served in a number of leadership roles including as executive director of the National Youth Employment Coalition, as director of workforce development at the New York Citywide School to Work Alliance and as director of public policy at the National Puerto Rican Forum. She also serves on the board of directors for the National Human Services Assembly and the Latin American Youth Center Career Academy.

“I salute Councilmember Nancy Navarro for her vision in creating the Children’s Opportunity Fund,” said Montgomery County Board of Education President Michael Durso. “As we work with our communities and partners to address the persistent achievement gap in our classrooms, institutions like the Children’s Opportunity Fund will be crucial in reaching across traditional walls that separate partners and resources to provide the appropriate supports to meet our children’s needs. The Board of Education looks forward to working with the Children’s opportunity Fund’s Executive Director Mala B. Thakur and other key stakeholders to design and implement strategic initiatives that provide a nurturing and equitable space for all children in our classrooms.”

“Narrowing the opportunity gap is critical work, and we look forward to working with Mrs. Thakur to ensure that our children receive necessary supports and resources so that they can flourish in their academic pursuits,” said Dr. Jack R. Smith, Superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools. “The Children’s Opportunity Fund will provide valuable interventions for the children who need it most. We very much look forward to this new partnership.”

In May, the COF established a strategic partnership with the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, which “works to ensure access and opportunity for all

residents in the Washington metropolitan area.” Known as the “hub of philanthropy,” the mission of the organization is to strengthen the region by supporting charitable giving and by providing effective leadership on critical community issues.

“We know that low-income youth do not have the same access to supports and opportunities to succeed as their more affluent peers do. The Children’s Opportunity Fund is critical to addressing this problem in Montgomery County,” said Bruce McNamer, president and Chief Executive Officer of The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region. “The Community Foundation brings together different sectors and community entities to solve problems, and this fund is a shining example of that. All of us must be engaged in the effort to close the achievement gap. Our young people are depending on us.”

The COF also has expanded its steering committee, which oversees operations. The committee includes key community leaders in philanthropy, business, health and children and youth experts. These steering committee includes:

- Uma Ahluwalia, director, Department of Health and Human Services
- Maria Navarro, chief academic officer, Montgomery County Public Schools
- Anna Hargrave, executive director, Community Foundation for the National Capital Region in Montgomery County
- April Kaplan, executive director, Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth and Families
- Gabriel Albornoz, director, Department of Recreation
- Kevin Beverly, president and CEO, Social and Scientific Systems
- Agnes Leshner, board member, Montgomery’s Kids
- David Asai, senior director of science education, Howard Hughes Medical Institute

Through the COF, Councilmember Navarro was able to create a partnership with the Norman R. and Ruth Rales Foundation to help the County fund the Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) summer program, which focuses on closing the achievement gap. The Rales Foundation pledged \$3 million over four years, which is matched by public funding, to bring the BELL program to the County. This summer marked the first class of BELL scholars in Montgomery County Public Schools.

BELL is a data-driven summer program that serves rising third and fourth graders to help prevent the knowledge drop, or “summer slide,” that occurs among students during the summer months. It is expected that the BELL program will serve 4,200 students in the County during a four-year period.

“In July, I had the opportunity to visit with students in the BELL program at Weller Road Elementary School in Silver Spring,” said Councilmember Navarro. “I experienced how the program fosters a child’s love of learning. I know that this innovative program along with other early interventions and wrap-around services are necessary for all of our children to have the opportunity to succeed. I appreciate the work of our community partners who pulled together through the COF to make a difference.”

####

