HealthSpark Foundation's Safety Net Resiliency Initiative

Safety Net Vision: We envision a resilient and financially sustainable safety net that allows anyone in MontCo to access high quality, coordinated, equitable, and culturally appropriate services no matter who they are, what they need, or where they live.

We believe that a strong safety net benefits everyone, and Montgomery County's safety net will thrive through a shared commitment to nourish and sustain it. Montgomery County's safety net will be:

- **Connected:** Collaborating to share resources, learning, and ideas, and to bring people together to recognize their common bond
- **Respected:** Positioning the safety net system to be recognized as an essential element of every community, and to be appropriately and consistently funded to deliver comprehensive and integrated services
- **Person-centered:** Serving individuals more holistically, integrating services across organizations, and ensuring a healing-centered approach to trauma and easy access to services
- **Equitable:** Making concrete progress to address disparities rooted in race, class, gender, sexual identity, differential abilities, and language differences
- **Impactful:** Providing effective connections and services to improve lives and communities

The following principles guide our work:

- **Common voice:** Promote the importance of the safety net system, leverage more support for it, and stand together for what is just
- **Anti-racism:** Work to root out racism and make the safety net system anti-racist and equitable
- **Justice:** Ensure access to equal education, health care, technology, services, and opportunity for all
- **Dignity:** Uphold the dignity of every member of every community
- **Partnership:** Develop strong, trusted partnerships that reduce redundancy and strengthen services
- **Community**: Build community with relationships, solidarity, and equity at the center

The framework above reflects the input of partners and community members that has been gathered by HealthSpark Foundation since the launch of the Safety Net Resiliency Initiative in 2017.

Safety Net Resiliency Initiative

The six opportunities for strengthening the safety net system in Montgomery County reflect the goals originally identified by community partners during 2017 – 2018, which were built upon through a community-driven process to capture the lessons learned and priorities revealed during the crises of 2020.

Six Opportunities:

1. Build the safety net system's capacity to advance racial and social justice.
2. Put an end to chronic underfunding and cut the red tape of the safety net system by increasing support for and engagement in the safety net system.
3. Sustain technology advances and support equitable access to technology.
4. Support the emotional well-being of safety net staff and community members.
5. Strengthen the operational practices of safety net providers.
6. Build a more vibrant, active, and inclusive community.

It is important to note that building the safety net system's capacity to advance racial and social justice emerged as the most urgent opportunity for action in 2020, reflecting the recognition that racism and social injustice underpin many of the dynamics that create the need for the safety net system and weaken its ability to deliver comprehensive solutions. That said, while the first opportunity for action is to build the safety net system's capacity to advance racial and social justice, the work is not limited to that one opportunity for action; rather, this commitment should be reflected in every opportunity for action and action step.

Opportunities for Action	Areas for Action
1. Build the safety net system's capacity to advance racial and social justice.	This means first **building personal, organization, and systemic understandings** of racism, white privilege, and institutionalized discrimination and how it manifests in our system. To build this knowledge, we need to **identify appropriate trainers and education programs, as well as fund and require training for staff, boards, donors, and policymakers.**

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	Second, it means dismantling structures and cultures across organizations and the system itself. This includes **promoting anti-racist and anti-discriminatory policies and practices, developing pipelines into leadership** for people of color and other underrepresented groups, and **building equity into hiring and HR practices**. **Areas for Action:** - **Policies and practices:** Promote policies and practices for staff and boards to center DEI, anti-discrimination in all its forms, and anti-racism – make it an expectation and a collective effort to be sure all organizations engage in efforts to address the racism experienced by all people of color and the distinct racism experienced by Black people; facilitate a cultural shift in organizations to embrace this work, akin to the adoption of approaches to trauma; develop common policies that organizations can adopt; adopt a shared commitment to and protocols for collecting and using demographic data - **Resources to build capacities:** Create and distribute a resource list of local, regional, national trainers/conveners with expertise on assisting safety net staff and boards to identify, create, and promote anti-racist policies and practices; create a similar resource list of those with expertise on how to support communities to create and pass anti-racist policies and practices - **Training and education:** Offer/require racial bias training and education; educate board, staff, volunteers and key stakeholders through a range of methods, including peer learning groups; equip organizations with the skills to facilitate dialogue and training with the community - **Analysis and planning to address root causes:** Engage in analysis and planning to capture data about disproportionate impacts on distinct populations, and address and educate about the root causes that result in groups of people being disproportionately in need of safety net services and support - **Community engagement:** Engage in dialogue to learn from the community; educate ourselves and community members about racial and social justice issues; ensure the input of Black voices and all people of color are driving what is needed and are designing strategies; ensure the input of all populations that experience distinct forms of discrimination are driving strategies, including but not limited to people with disabilities/differential abilities, immigrants, women, people who identify as LGBTQ; use our resources to support critical partners to center anti-racism (e.g., school districts); engage with emerging leaders and faith communities - **Funder commitment:** Ask funders to fund anti-racism as part of regular grant cycles and invest in people of color-led organizations; engage with funder collaboratives and networks to build support for this funding

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	- **Opportunities in service provider organizations:** Create professional development, mentorship programs, and leadership opportunities for people of color; distribute training and practical tools for HR and management to use in recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and promoting diverse applicants and staff
2. Put an end to chronic underfunding and cut the red tape of the safety net system by increasing support for and engagement in the safety net system.	This work starts by advocating for full funding of the safety net system, so that services are funded at true cost. This includes **paying livable wages and health benefits** for all staff, **paying actual rates for administration**, and **funding evaluation and capacity building**. This also includes changing restrictive regulations that limit who qualifies for help. Ideas include **raising income limits** for services like subsidized childcare, **reducing redundant application requirements** across programs, and **extending grace periods for income recalculations** so that households aren't penalized for earning income. Finally, this means **developing a common agenda for advocacy and policy-making** that supports a holistic approach to funding and providing safety net services. **Areas for Action:** - **Funder education about organizational and system needs:** Be assertive with funders to tell them what clients' and consumers' needs are; illustrate to funders the need for consumer input and guidance, and their role in building responsiveness among service providers to engage consumers; leverage/demand resources to build toward long-term goals for communities (and not just respond to overwhelming immediate needs); highlight gender and racial inequities as reasons for under-funding; showcase the power and utility of advocacy and how to measure advocacy outcomes; let service providers define evaluation measures and metrics, and build their capacity to engage in effective evaluation; promote the need for more braided and coordinated funding - **Full funding for the safety net:** Ensure that staff members earn a living wage and receive benefits commensurate with the for-profit world; secure adequate funding for administrative and operating costs – challenge chronic under-funding of safety net services and providers; collect baseline data of the number of service providers that require safety net services to highlight the need for more funding and the economic impact on under-funding the safety net - **Program eligibility and access:** Increase income level to access help (e.g., Early Head Start, Head Start, and PreK Counts, Medical Assistance for Workers with Disabilities, other programs); attend to the intersection of needs that many individuals face (e.g., a deaf person at a food pantry); support enhancements to the 211 system - **Government contracts and funding:** Challenge/change county and state contracts with limits for salaries and benefits; redistribute tax dollars to where there is need, specifically schools and safety net organizations

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3. Sustain technology advances and support equitable access to technology.	This includes sustaining telehealth advances made in 2020 by **working with payors to retain telehealth/service-related advances** post-COVID and to health plans directly; and **advocating for changes in HIPAA** to allow telehealth to continue. This also includes ensuring that tech advances don't exacerbate existing inequalities. This includes taking steps to **ensure access to internet is available to everyone**, **creating programs to provide equipment such as phones and tablets** to individuals and families in need, and **raising the skills of people who are new to technology**. **Areas for Action:** - **Promoting service improvements that have been achieved:** Showcase improvements in engaging clients and the benefits of virtual services - **Sustaining telehealth advances:** Permit telehealth and tele-services going forward; work with payors to retain telehealth/service-related advances post-COVID (e.g., WIC, Medicaid, CHIP, Medicare) and to health plans directly; advocate for changes in HIPAA to allow telehealth to continue - **Improvements in organizations and communities:** Improve technology in organizations and communities; emphasize the need for funding technology capacities in service provider organizations - **Community access to wifi and equipment:** Educate about the importance of technology as a fundamental need, not a luxury; secure free countywide Internet; create a program to provide phones/ipads/tablets/equipment to individuals and families in need; raise the skill of people who are new to technology and promote the use of technology; promote the use of and access to accessible and more inclusive software, hardware, and supports - **Corporate partnerships to fund improvements**: Partner with corporations to encourage (or mandate) Corporate Social Responsibility (e.g., mandate for technology companies to support their communities, similar to banks)
4. Support the emotional well-being of safety net staff and community members.	This starts by supporting a **community-wide approach to trauma-informed** care that recognizes the intersection between trauma, racism, and poverty. This includes **requiring trauma training** for all providers, boards, and funders, and providing **funding to support trauma-informed approaches**. This also includes ensuring that everyone in our community has access to mental health resources by **designing outreach for those who cannot go to regular support services**. This also includes **increasing mental health care resources for health care workers and essential workers, including case workers and front line staff**. **Areas for Action:**

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	- **Resources for the community:** Increase emotional health/isolation resources in the community; emphasize telehealth resources; educate about and address the intersection of emotional wellness with DEI and racism, and the needs of distinct populations; design community visits and outreach for those who cannot go to regular support services to prevent and address isolation - **Trauma-responsive approaches:** Require trauma training for all sector staff, volunteers, board members, and funders - **Support for service providers:** Provide emotional and mental health resources and trauma-informed care for health care workers and essential workers, including direct service providers; increase community awareness of the contributions that service providers make in the community - **Compensation and benefits for service providers:** Include emotional and mental health resources and opportunities as part of compensation and benefits (e.g., time off or extra pay for essential workers)
5. Strengthen the operational practices of safety net providers.	This **includes strengthening skills in financial management, scenario planning, and business continuity planning**. It also includes **supporting adaptations accelerated by COVID-19** such as banking, virtual work, and flexible work schedules. Support organizational coordination, such as **exploring shared purchasing power for back office services** like professional services, benefits, fundraising technology and software, translation and interpretation, and insurance. **Strengthen nonprofit boards** by bridging their knowledge gap about the sector and the impacts of the 2020 crises. Enhance organizational performance by enhancing **engagement of community leaders, volunteers, consumers, and the use of new service models**. **Areas for Action:** - **Financial management:** Strengthen skills in financial management and scenario planning; create partnerships for low-cost opportunities to improve skills within organizations - **Adaptations:** Continue adaptations accelerated by COVID-19 (e.g., banking, virtual work, flexible schedules); explore how to identify needs and gaps when services are not provided in-person, which limits or eliminates the opportunity to provide spontaneous responses to unexpected needs - **Adaptive leadership:** Develop leaders across the safety net that deploy systems thinking at all levels within safety net organizations - **Staff needs:** Address the need for improved resources and flexibility for staff; support virtual work in terms of logistics, equipment, and emotional support

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	- **Data:** Providers increasingly value data and evidence for services, evaluation, financials, strategy, and realizing the vision of a strong safety net - **Non-programmatic coordination and sharing:** Share purchasing power and back office services (e.g., for professional services, benefits, fundraising technology and software, translation and interpretation, insurance); engage in collective trainings across organizations and sectors - **Office space changes:** Re-assess office space and explore new models - **Strengthening nonprofit Boards of Directors:** Strengthen nonprofit boards by bridging their knowledge gap about the sector and the impacts of the 2020 crises - **Engaging formal and informal leaders:** Engage formal and informal leaders, collectively, to ensure that resources are well-known and community input drives program and service design - **Volunteers:** Build and maintain a volunteer corps, and highlight the importance of volunteers to a healthy and functioning safety net - **Transportation:** Address transportation barriers and improve public transportation, including service delivery approaches that reduce or eliminate the need for in-person visits (e.g., requirements for in-person visits to government agencies); leverage private sector options - **Reducing red tape:** Reduce or remove red tape and obstacles to receiving help (e.g., eligibility, IDs) - **Mobile services:** Make services more mobile, less location-based: "centers without walls" by using parks, theaters, schools, restaurants - **Language inclusion:** Expect/mandate cultural and language competence and inclusion - **Prioritizing vulnerable populations:** Prioritize vulnerable populations and improve capacities to care for those who are most vulnerable (DV victims, child abuse victims, immigrants, older adults, homeless, people with disabilities), recognizing that who identifies as vulnerable is dynamic as people's needs change - **Consumer engagement:** Disseminate best practices for consumer and client engagement and feedback, including technical assistance to address logistics, compensation, expectations, communications
6. Build a more vibrant, active, and	**Replicate and build-on collaborative models** to promote coordination as a best practice and shared part of all organizations' values.

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inclusive community.	Share power with consumers and marginalized communities by **establishing a Consumer Advisory Council** to advise all service providers and **create structured opportunities for listening** to marginalized communities about their needs, and advancing their priorities. Expect or mandate **cultural and language competence and inclusion**. Engage in collective advocacy and learning, and **integrate advocacy for policy change into the regular activities of safety net providers**. **Promote the value of the safety net** to building a more vibrant, active, and inclusive community, and **increase respect and support for it**. **Areas for Action:** - **Building on established models and networks:** Replicate and build-on good collaborative models to promote coordination as a best practice and shared part of all organization's values: TCN, Bucks-Mont Collaborative, ICN, Your Way Home, Community Connections, food networks - **Coordination team:** Establish a Safety Net Coordination Team that meets regularly in non-crisis times and weekly in times of crisis for daily coordination and coordination to achieve the big goals of building back better - **Listening to marginalized communities:** Create intentional and structured opportunities for listening to what marginalized communities see and need, and advance their priorities - **Consumer guidance:** Establish a Consumer Advisory Council to advise all service providers, ideally complementing the consumer engagement of individual organizations - **Gatherings:** Create a structure that deliberately and regularly brings partners together (government, nonprofits, emergency management, businesses, etc.) in support of the safety net - **Collective advocacy:** Engage in collective advocacy and learning; better integrate advocacy for policy change into the regular activities of safety net providers; train safety net providers about the advocacy activities they can do; encourage each organization to designate a policy advocate/point person; explore the possibility of eliminating the "non-lobbying" clause so organizations can speak-out; establish an advocacy task force that has access to the County Commissioners and is included in the action and decisions made at the county level - **Commitment to social change:** Emphasize social change among service providers to go beyond social services and to address inequities

Opportunities for Action	Areas for Action
	- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Facilitate cross-sector collaboration (e.g., involvement of churches, school districts, hospitals), and non-traditional service providers, such as arts and culture organizations - **Communicating about needs:** Communicate about the importance of access to health care, education, child care, safety, good jobs, other basic needs, and life enrichment opportunities for strengthening communities; provide public education about who became fragile and vulnerable as a result of COVID-19; share the range of effects and experiences; access and use data to make logical and practical suggestions to legislators - **Celebrate the safety net:** Highlight the creativity, persistence, and compassion of service providers – in general and particularly in response to crises