

**Priorities for 2016 Milwaukee County Budget
 Milwaukee County Board Public Hearing & Hearings November 2, 2015
 Barbara Beckert, Director – Milwaukee Office**

Thank you for the opportunity to share priorities for the 2016 Milwaukee County Budget. The Milwaukee County budget is an essential part of the funding for services that are critical to the lives and independence of people with disabilities and we appreciate your commitment to hearing from the community. I am speaking today on behalf of Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW), the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy Agency for the State of Wisconsin, as well as sharing priorities for the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force.

HOUSING

Safe, affordable and accessible housing is critically important to the independence of people with disabilities and to reducing reliance on crisis and institutional services. The Milwaukee County Housing Division has been very effective in their outreach and assistance for individuals with disabilities, including those who are homeless. We support the work now underway to implement the Housing First model in Milwaukee, including the initiative to provide housing to those who are chronically homeless as defined by HUD. Milwaukee continues to have long waiting lists for HUD vouchers for subsidized housing and for the BHD supportive housing units. We support the Housing Division budget proposals which are essential to their work to advance Housing First and to provide housing and supportive services to individuals who are homeless.

In addition, we strongly support restoration of the \$300,000 in funding for Milwaukee shelters. Many Milwaukee residents may not meet the HUD definition of homeless but they are nonetheless homeless or experiencing housing insecurity. Our shelters are an important part of the safety net, and critically important for many county residents with disabilities. A high percentage of Milwaukee County residents with disabilities are low income and unable to afford housing that is not subsidized. The average income for someone on SSI is around \$750 a month. Subsidized housing is income based – rent is one third of the individual's income. The price for an unsubsidized efficiency or one bedroom that is safe and decent is close to \$500 a month. Because that is well over half of the monthly income for an individual on SSI, landlords will not even consider renting to them. In addition, a significant number of homeless people in Milwaukee County have serious and persistent mental illness; the 2009 Point in Time Survey, Milwaukee Continuum of Care, indicates that 41% of homeless persons in Milwaukee County have a mental illness. We cannot move forward with reform of our mental health system without addressing the housing crisis. We urge you to retain the allocation of \$300,000 for the shelters, given the great need.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation is vital to the independence of people with disabilities and older adults, as so many do not drive due to disability or limited income. Thank you for your ongoing support for expanding transit and paratransit and for the keeping these services affordable, as well as your support for the GO pass which has been very important in helping county residents with disabilities maintain their independence as well as reduce reliance on paratransit.

We also support the budget proposal for moving forward with implementation of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) in Milwaukee County. The proposed project corridor will connect downtown Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center, the top two job centers in Milwaukee metro area, and may also include service to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, another significant high-demand destination. Access to jobs is a top priority for people with disabilities, and limited availability of accessible transportation is one of the major barriers to employment. We support the BRT proposal and the allocation of \$300,000 to move forward quickly with the environmental impact study which is required to move forward with this important initiative.

Thank you for your service to our community and your commitment to these important services which are vital to the independence of Milwaukee County residents with disabilities.

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