



IMPACT REPORT 2024

# Serving Maryland Families

*We're here because we've been there too!*







## Growth, Impact and Hope Ahead

We're here because we've been there too. At Maryland Coalition of Families, this isn't just a slogan—it's the heart of our mission. As we reflect on fiscal year 2024, we are filled with gratitude for your support in our crucial work to reduce the number of families who feel alone and uncertain when learning to manage the behavioral health challenges of someone they love.

This year, MCF supported 4,919 unique families—more than ever before—which impacts each individual of the family—tens of thousands of people. This remarkable achievement underscores the power and necessity of family peer support in Maryland. Notably, 73% of the families we served have a child with a behavioral or mental health challenge, a figure that continues to rise annually.

Our impact extended beyond direct support. Our community engagement undeniably demonstrated the power of collective action in shaping policies that matter to Maryland families. We had our most successful legislative session to date, testifying over 30 times to ensure that policymakers heard directly from families about their needs and experiences with Maryland's behavioral healthcare system. These efforts contributed to the passage of critical measures for Maryland families on a range of issues from legislation to sustain the 988 crisis hotline to support for training coaches to recognize signs of mental health disorders in their athletes. We also connected families with over 12,000 community resources, addressing a wide range of needs including treatment options, educational services, and legal, financial, and housing assistance programs.

The launch of our new Strategic Plan has propelled us forward in our work, increasing our visibility, education, and advocacy efforts. We're elevating family voice in Maryland in key decision-making spaces, ensuring that those most affected by behavioral health policies have a seat at the table.

As Maryland families work tirelessly to help their children get the support they need in school, find a mental health professional to finally get the right diagnosis, help their loved one seek care for substance use disorder and so much more, our family peer support specialists are right there by their side. This does not come without growing pains as the demand continues to increase. The Maryland Department of Health has seen a 30% increase in youth seeking mental health services over the past year. This surge in demand highlights the need for more family peer support specialists but is also stretching our existing resources. We continue to invest in our staff to ensure that they are fairly compensated for the crucial work they do and identify new and unique ways to recruit and retain our incredibly dedicated employees. We are committed to exploring new funding models while strengthening our partnerships with state agencies and private foundations to address this issue.

In the face of all these challenges, we remain steadfast in our commitment to our mission. We're adapting our strategies, reaching more families, and advocating for policy changes. We will continue to provide solutions together with key partners and stakeholders to leave no Maryland family behind.



**As experienced caregivers, we provide support, guidance, and hope to people who love or care for someone with a behavioral health challenge and advocate to improve the systems they rely on.**

We envision a community that prioritizes equitable and compassionate behavioral health services.

As we look to the future, we're excited to celebrate MCF's 25th anniversary in 2025. This milestone represents a quarter-century of providing support and hope to families across Maryland. We remain committed to our vision of a community that prioritizes compassionate behavioral health services for all Marylanders.

Whether you're a family we serve, a partner, or a supporter, you're an integral part of the MCF family. We invite you to celebrate our achievements with us and consider making a donation to support our ongoing work. Together, we can continue to make a meaningful impact in the lives of Maryland families.

Thank you for your unwavering support. We look forward to another year of growth, impact, and hope.

Sincerely,



Christi Green  
Executive Director



Mark A. Lancaster, Esq.  
Board President

## **Our Foundation**

### **Family Peer Support**

When someone you love has a behavioral health challenge, it can be life-changing to hear from and talk with someone who has gone through similar experiences. Through our support, we help families feel less isolated and alone. We help them become their own advocates. We help them build confidence in their own abilities and give them a vision for a better future. We help families by:

**Providing connections to resources, treatment options and other services.**

**Helping them navigate complex systems of care.**

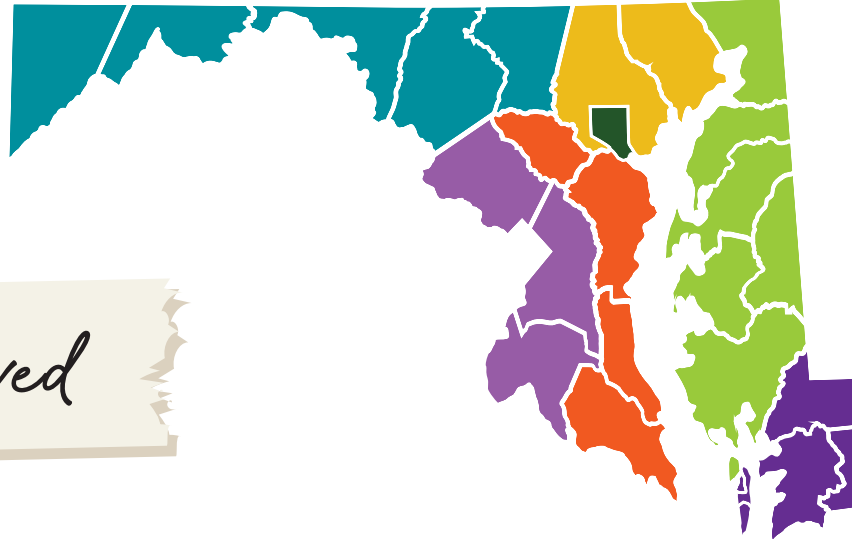
**Teaching skills that promote self-care and resiliency.**

**Offering emotional support, guidance, and hope.**

**Offering workshops, trainings, and support groups.**

# Our Impact

*4,919 families served*



## 652

### Families served in Western Maryland

Our Western Maryland team values how the beauty of their natural surroundings enhance the well-being of the families they support. Last year, they hosted events like a Kid's Fishing Rodeo and a Spring Fling Express on the Scenic Line of the Western Maryland Railroad, helping families reconnect while emphasizing self-care. Additionally, during Mental Health Awareness Month, they organized 'Bowl Over Stigma' to promote positive mental health and combat stigma.

## 1,043

### Families served in Mid-Central Maryland

The Mid-Central team is highly creative in engaging families to foster strong, lasting relationships. They offer opportunities like mini golf tournaments, trips to Port Discovery, and workshops on art as therapy, helping parents and caregivers connect with their loved ones and others on similar journeys.

## 564

### Families Served in Southern Central Maryland

Our Southern Central team is dedicated to continually enhancing their skills to better serve families. Last year, three members became certified Master Presenters for Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and Stages of Change, while five earned certification in the evidence-based parenting program Strengthening Families. One staff member also became a certified Conflict Coach and Family Mediator. The team actively participates in various regional committees, including Opioid Prevention Teams, Drug Court Committees, the Calvert County Student Safety and Advisory Committee, the Local Behavioral Health Advisory Councils, and the Calvert Alliance Against Substance Use.

## 580

### Families served in Baltimore City

The Baltimore City team shows up to serve everywhere at every opportunity! When they aren't offering critical support groups and attending community events, this team is leading the way



with MCF's pilot program to offer family peer support to families who are in the midst of a crisis. In collaboration with BCRI and the University of Maryland Medical Center, the City's mobile crisis team provider is bringing family peer support to parents and caregivers exactly when and where they need it most!

# 714

## Families served in North Central Maryland

The Northern Central team is dedicated to helping families connect and build natural support systems through regular support groups like Self-Awareness is Wellness. These gatherings provide parents and caregivers with a safe space for self-reflection, self-care, and meaningful connections with others on similar journeys. Through creative expression and open conversation, the team fosters togetherness at every support group meeting.

# 690

## Families served in Mid/Upper Central Maryland

Our Mid-Upper Shore team understands that strong relationships are essential for making an impact. Last year, they focused on building lasting connections through speaking engagements at schools, businesses, and community organizations, as well as serving on local committees to amplify family voices. Their most important relationships are with the families they support. In addition to providing vital assistance through virtual and in-person support groups, they organized family engagement activities like a pool party, a fishing event, and holiday gatherings featuring craft activities that celebrate diverse traditions.

# 551

## Families served in Lower Shore

Our Lower Shore team excels at helping the families they support build skills that promote self-care and resiliency. They offered several support groups and workshops this year that created space for parents and caregivers to share their experiences, bond with other families, and provide mutual support. They also believe that family bonds are strengthened through fun! They hosted several events that brought families together from across the region and provided them with the opportunity to forget about doctor's appointments, therapy sessions, and IEP meetings and just enjoy the power of family togetherness for a few hours.

# 3,560

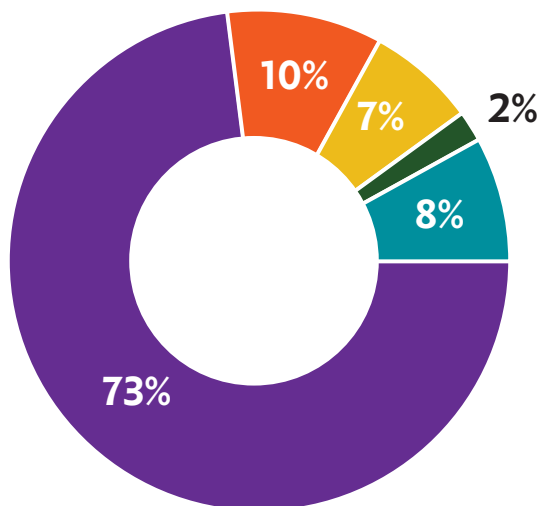
## Hours helping families connect with a Family Peer Support Specialist

Our Statewide Referral Team is MCF's front door, responsible for providing a warm welcome and safe space for families seeking family peer support. This team devoted thousands of hours last year to understanding each family's needs to ensure they were quickly connected to the right Family Peer Support Specialist. MCF is proud to have grown our statewide bilingual team last year with 6 Spanish-speaking staff providing family peer support, conducting intakes, and offering administrative support to the program division.



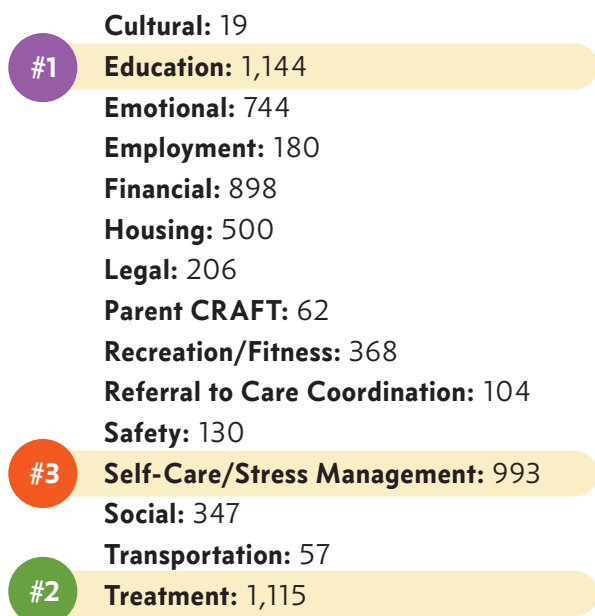


## Reason for Seeking Services



- Mental Health, age 17 and under
- Mental Health, age 18+
- Substance Use
- Problem Gambling
- Co-occurring

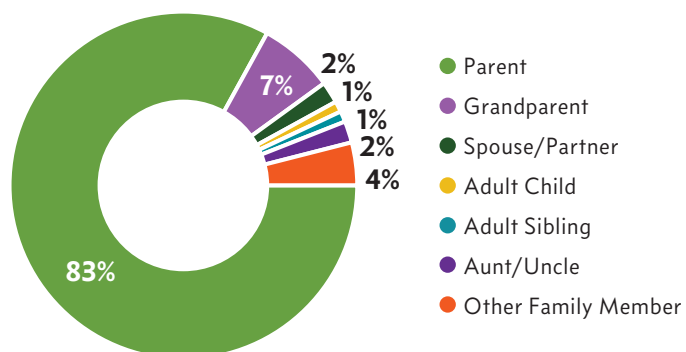
## Resources Provided by Category



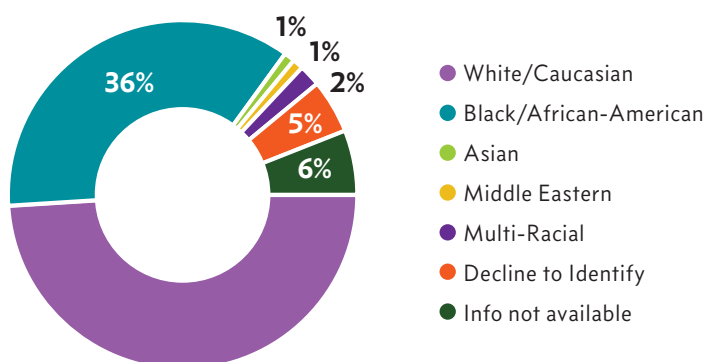
Our staff also provided 103 presentations to raise awareness about the Good Samaritan Law which is intended to save the lives of people experiencing a medical emergency caused alcohol or drug use without fear of arrest, charge, or prosecution.



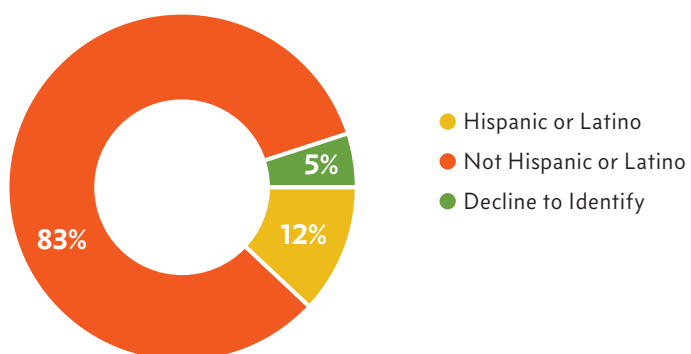
## Families Served by Caregiver Role



## Families Served by Race



## Families Served by Ethnicity







**322**

Support groups to help families connect and build natural support networks.

**87**

Educational workshops to give families the tools they need to thrive.

**54**

Family fun events to provide opportunities to just spend time together as a family.



## Nicole, MCF Statewide Family Peer Support Specialist: Addressing Problem Gambling

At MCF, family peer support extends across mental health, substance use, and problem gambling. We understand that these issues rarely exist in isolation—problem gambling often goes hand-in-hand with mental health struggles and substance use, creating a complex web of challenges for families. Our family peer support services are designed to help caregivers navigate these interconnected issues, offering emotional support, resources, and guidance.

The number of caregivers we are serving who support a loved one with problem gambling has steadily increased, especially as more young people struggle with this issue. Problem gambling isn't just a financial problem—it deeply impacts the mental health of individuals and their families, leaving caregivers to navigate stress, anxiety, and isolation.

At MCF, we've seen a troubling rise in gambling behaviors among school-aged children and young adults. There is a significant gap in resources designed to support minors, as many programs

and clinicians focus primarily on adults. We are actively addressing this gap by raising awareness and providing education on the unique risks youth face. The stigma surrounding gambling, particularly for college-aged students, can make it difficult for young people to seek help, as they often see support groups as spaces for older adults. Prevention is key—educating youth before they need treatment is a top priority for us.

We also remain dedicated to serving adult populations. We understand the far-reaching consequences of gambling and will continue to support all families affected by these challenges. MCF is committed to ensuring that caregivers and their loved ones, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, socioeconomic background, religion, or any other aspect of identity, receive the resources and support they need.





## Devon and Nadia: **Advocacy. Community. Determination.**

When Devon was just 4 years old, his family embarked on a challenging journey seeking the right support for his developmental needs. Initially, they turned to Child Find, but after an intake and assessment, they learned that Devon didn't qualify for their services. Undeterred, Devon's mother, Bina, sought out a private evaluation from the Care Center of Howard County, which set off a series of connections that would eventually lead the family to the Maryland Coalition of Families.

Through Care Center, they were introduced to a behavioral specialist who provided valuable classroom evaluations and suggestions. This connection then led them to therapy services and MCF, just as COVID-19 forced all services to be offered virtually. While the adjustment was challenging, these services became a crucial lifeline.

By 2021, Devon and his sister Nadia, who had begun feeling left out amidst the attention given to Devon, were both receiving support from the Center for Children. At the same time, Devon and Nadia's parents were working with a Family Peer Support Specialist (FPSS) which was transformative for the entire family. Bina gained a confidante who understood her struggles and a renewed sense of confidence in her ability to advocate for her children.

Bina realized how much she had learned about Devon's diagnosis and how far the family had come thanks to the support of her FPSS. When she applied for MCF's Family Leadership Program, she wasn't sure what to expect, but she was determined to find a way to expand the services

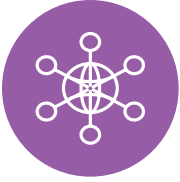
her family had come to rely on. Just weeks before the program began, she received the devastating news that funding for Devon's services at the Center for Children had been lost.

Determined to fight for what her family needed, Bina sought answers but found herself facing many dead ends. But during MCF's Family Leadership Program, she learned about a crucial County Council budget hearing the following Monday—a turning point in their journey.

The next 2 days were a whirlwind. Bina worked with MCF's Policy and Advocacy Manager, Ashley Tauler, to draft her testimony at the County budget hearing. As luck would have it, Bina was called to testify just as she and Devon were getting ready to head home after his baseball game. Balancing a laptop, phone, and a tired, hungry child, she delivered her testimony from the car. Devon, understanding the importance of the moment, remained quiet, while his mother shared their story and advocated for the continuation of the services that had become so vital to their family.

Thanks to the support and empowerment from MCF, and Bina's determination, the hearing led to the restoration of funding for the Center for Children, ensuring that Devon and Nadia could continue receiving the critical services they needed. Today, Bina continues to work with an FPSS, and often reflects on how much knowledge and resilience the last four years have brought her family. Their story is a testament to the power of advocacy, community, and unwavering determination.





## Children's Mental Health Matters! Campaign

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The Children's Mental Health Matters Campaign, an annual partner initiative between the Mental Health Association of Maryland and Maryland Coalition of Families, aims to raise public awareness and acceptance of children's mental health as essential to child and family wellbeing. The campaign provides educational resources and hosts events to support this mission.

This year, we expanded the Children's Mental Health Matters Poster Contest to include all school-age students in Maryland, and we were thrilled to receive over 100 submissions. The creativity and passion for children's mental health awareness showcased in these entries truly amazed us. The winning artwork, created by 11-year-old Brynn from the Baltimore area, has resonated with many. So far, we've distributed over 800 posters featuring her inspiring design, with more requests still coming in.



## Ensuring Family Voice

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MCF is proud to partner with Maryland's Department of Human Services/Social Services Administration to ensure family voice is included in the Department's ongoing commitment to providing the highest quality services to families in need. MCF's Caregiver Advisors serve on internal committees and workgroups to inform the development of programs and services and review policies and documents to offer their perspective as parents and caregivers. MCF also conducts focus groups throughout the year to gather input from parents and caregivers across Maryland to help the Department understand the challenges families experience. This critical partnership demonstrates the Department's belief in the power and importance of family voice and ensures that one of the systems our families rely on the most is responsive to their needs.





## Family Leadership Program

In May, 16 parents and caregivers from Howard County attended a weekend of respite and learning through MCF's Family Leadership Program, funded by the Howard County Office of the Local Children's Bureau. Participants, including parents, grandparents, and aunts raising children with mental health challenges, engaged in workshops on children's mental health, special education, and advocacy. At the end of the weekend, they received certificates and joined a growing group of alumni across Maryland making an impact in their communities. Congratulations to the class of 2024!



## Families Show Up to Advocate in Annapolis

Once again, MCF brought families from across Maryland to Annapolis for an empowering day of learning, community-building, and advocacy. **Almost 200 parents, caregivers, youth, and partners descended on the State capitol to learn about proposed legislation that impacts them and those they love with behavioral health challenges.**

Attendees heard from Dr. Laura Herrera-Scott, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Health, Rafael J. Lopez, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Human Services, and Delegate Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk, Chair of the Health and Government Operations Committee about crucial policy and legislative initiatives. Participants were then provided the opportunity to meet with more than 65 elected representatives and their staff to share their stories and use their voice to advocate for issues important to them. One attendee shared "This event has incredible meaning because it provides access to civic engagement that many have never before experienced. In my opinion, the mere existence of this program is a huge win for people in Maryland."





## Family Success Story: **From Seeking Help to Becoming a Source of Support**

In October 2020, Aarika's life shifted dramatically when her daughter was diagnosed with ADHD, autism, anxiety, and dyslexia. After homeschooling for several years, she enrolled her daughter in public school on the recommendation of an occupational therapist, hoping it would offer the specialized support her daughter needed. However, the transition was anything but smooth.

By the summer of 2023, feeling overwhelmed by the complexities of navigating autism services and the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, Aarika began researching options. She found the Maryland Coalition of Families through a state services page and reached out for help. She was soon connected with a Family Peer Support Specialist (FPSS)—someone with lived experience who understood both the school and behavioral health systems and was skilled at advocating for family needs.

The FPSS provided essential support, guiding Aarika through the challenging IEP process. Despite the school's initial hesitation to begin due to her daughter's recent enrollment, Aarika was able to secure the necessary accommodations with her FPSS's help. The FPSS also supported Aarika through difficult conversations with family members who struggled to accept her daughter's diagnoses, offering both practical advice and emotional reassurance.

By spring 2024, the family found a sense of stability. Aarika's daughter was receiving the support she needed at school, and Aarika felt empowered in her role as an advocate. Though their formal work with MCF had ended, Aarika remained in touch with her FPSS, who had become a trusted resource.

During one follow-up conversation, the FPSS encouraged Aarika to consider applying for a Family Peer Support Specialist role, recognizing her natural ability to connect with others and share resources. Though hesitant—having been out of the workforce for over a decade—Aarika decided to apply, motivated by her passion for MCF's mission.

In July 2024, Aarika was hired as a Family Peer Support Specialist. Now, she uses her own journey to guide other families through similar challenges, from advocating for educational needs to connecting them with community resources. Her story has come full circle—she has become a source of strength and guidance, helping to build a more supportive mental health community for families across the region.

This success story highlights the power of support and community, showing how one family's experience can inspire and uplift others on their own journeys.



# Legislative Advocacy:

## Elevating Family Voice in Annapolis

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Throughout the 2024 Maryland General Assembly, the Maryland Coalition of Families played a crucial role in advancing legislative measures. Our advocacy efforts resulted in the passage of 7 of the 11 bills we supported. Our Executive Director, Christi Green, and Policy & Advocacy Manager, Ashley Tauler, testified a combined 32 times, and Ashley assisted 13 individuals with preparing their own testimony, ensuring that the voices of those affected by behavioral health challenges were heard.

From supporting measures to sustain 988 to ensuring naloxone is available when and where someone in crisis needs it most, MCF's efforts reflect our ongoing commitment to improving behavioral health support across the state. We remain dedicated to advocating for the measures that didn't advance as far as we hoped and will continue to work tirelessly to bring about the changes needed in our communities.

**SB 165 / HB 204:** This bill will require all public school and college or university coaches to be trained to recognize signs of mental illness in students who participate in athletic programs.

**SB 212 / HB 1048:** This bill requires the Commission on Behavioral Health Care Treatment and Access to make recommendations regarding the financing structure and quality oversight necessary to integrate somatic and behavioral health services under Medicaid.

**HB 933 / SB 974:** This is the bill that establishes a long-term funding plan to sustain 988 services in Maryland.

**SB 571 / HB 603:** This bill, known as the Maryland Kids Code, will require developers of online products most often used by children to build in safety measures by default and design.

**HB 903 / SB 797:** This bill will provide legal assistance to low-income individuals who need support for issues related to special education services.

**SB 93 / HB 110:** Toward the end of the session, this bill was combined with SB 791/HB 932 and ensures transparency from insurers to explain why a mental health or substance use claim is denied.

**SB1099:** This is a bill we were asked to support by Senator Will Smith toward the end of the session. Though not part of the initial bills we were watching, we gladly signed on because it's important and makes good sense. This bill would require that all public buildings in Maryland have naloxone co-located in places where there are Automated External Defibrillator (AED) machines. Naloxone is a nasal spray that can be administered to someone in the midst of an opioid overdose and has been known to save many lives.

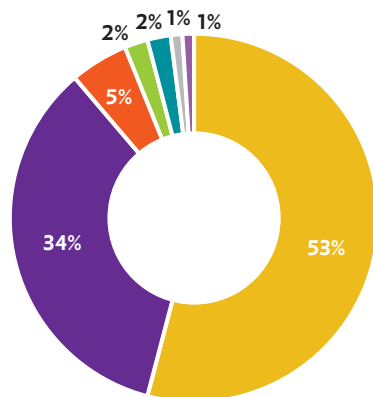


## Grant Revenue

### Fiscal Year 2024

MCF's revenue totaled 6,213,177 in Fiscal Year 2024 with grants accounting for 98% of this total. This chart represents this grant revenue broken down by program category.

*\*Administration is covered by program grants revenue.*



- Family Peer Support - Mental Health
- Family Peer Support - Substance Use & Problem Gambling
- Family Peer Support - Child Welfare
- Family Engagement - Child Welfare
- Young Adult Programming
- Public Awareness
- Family Leadership Training

## Our Funders

**Our deepest thanks to the agencies that support MCF's work:**

Anne Arundel County Mental Health Agency, Inc.  
 Baltimore City Department of Social Services  
 Behavioral Health System Baltimore, Inc.  
 Calvert County Health Department Local Behavioral Health Authority  
 Charles County Government, Department of Community Services  
 Community Foundation of Howard County  
 Howard County Government, Department of Community Resources and Services  
 Maryland Community Health Resources Commission  
 Maryland Department of Human Services, Social Services Administration  
 Maryland Department of Health, Behavioral Health Administration  
 Prince George's County Health Department  
 Queen Anne's County Community Partnerships for Children and Families, Local Management Board  
 The University of Maryland, Baltimore  
 Worcester County Local Management Board





## Honoring Cynthia Kirk: A Legacy of Compassion and Commitment

Cynthia Kirk has been an invaluable member of the Maryland Coalition of Families for 17 years, starting her journey under the leadership of our first Executive Director, Jane Walker, when MCF was still in its early stages. At that time, there were no families for her to work with yet, but true to her character, Cynthia immersed herself in learning everything she could about special education and other essential topics. This dedication prepared her to support families when the opportunity arose, helping her grow into a powerhouse of knowledge, perseverance, and dedication that has benefited thousands of families in Howard County.

Over the years, countless families in Howard County have received peer support from Cynthia, consistently sharing heartwarming words of appreciation for her dedication. Many families have praised her exceptional ability to connect and support families in need, and it's no surprise given the profound impact she consistently makes.

Cynthia's warmth, compassion, and ability to create a safe space for families to share their struggles and triumphs have made her a beloved figure in our community. From support groups to

drum circles, her positive energy and collaborative spirit have inspired both the families she serves and her colleagues.

This year, Cynthia was honored with the Ginger Rosela Spirit Award, recognizing her as an extraordinary family peer support specialist who embodies the essence of our mission. Cynthia's recognition brought joy to our staff meeting, where we celebrated her well-deserved accolades. Additionally, she received a Certificate of Recognition from Dr. Calvin Ball, the Howard County Executive, acknowledging her remarkable contributions to the community.

This year, Cynthia announced her retirement from MCF. As Cynthia embarks on her next chapter, we want to extend our deepest gratitude for her tireless dedication and the profound impact she has made on the lives of so many. Cynthia, your legacy of love and support will continue to guide and inspire us all. Thank you for being an incredible colleague and a cherished member of our family. Please join us in celebrating Cynthia's much-deserved retirement!





A quarter of a century ago, a group of parents and caregivers with children who had mental health challenges began working together to help each other access often scarce resources and navigate complicated systems to address their children's complex educational and treatment needs. They provided one another with the emotional support, guidance, and hope that only someone who has been there before can understand. Their efforts resulted in an empowered, committed, and well-informed cadre of compassionate parents and caregivers who wanted to build a pathway for others on similar journeys. From their efforts, the Maryland Coalition of Families was born.

In the ensuing 25 years, our work has grown beyond serving only families with children with mental health disorders. Today, MCF supports anyone who loves or cares for someone of any

age with a mental health, substance use, or problem gambling challenge. Our Family Peer Support Specialists can be found in hospital emergency departments, serving on mobile crisis teams, offering support groups in collaboration with substance use treatment centers, and working in concert with peers from the problem gambling hotline.

MCF now has nearly 90 employees supporting MCF's work with families in all 24 Maryland jurisdictions. As we look ahead to our next 25 years, MCF is committed to continuing to expand the critical support we offer because we know how important it is to have someone in your corner who understands what it's like to love someone with a behavioral health challenge.

We're here because we've been there too.

**In honor of our 25th anniversary, please consider joining our Founders Circle with a one-time \$250 donation or a recurring monthly donation of \$25. More details can be found on the Ways to Give page on our website.**





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*We're here for you.*



8950 State Route 108, Suite 223  
Columbia, MD 21045

410-730-8267

[mdcoalition.org](http://mdcoalition.org)

