

EMBARGOED until October 28, 2020 at 6:00 p.m.

**2020 State of the County
Howard County Executive Calvin Ball**

Opening

Transcending geographic boundaries, socioeconomics and political affiliation, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every part of our world, our nation, our state, our County and every aspect of our lives. Millions have contracted this virus and more than 220,000 people in the United States have lost their lives.

Across our county, many of you have experienced job loss, a shortage of childcare or have faced food insecurity and housing loss for the first time. I know there is much anxiety and uncertainty. As we move forward, my Administration is learning and adapting daily by applying our basic principles. I believe that together we will continue to...

- *Empower* Ready and Successful Students
- *Establish* Safe and Engaged Communities
- *Champion* a Clean and Sustainable Environment
- *Invest* in Thriving and Healthy Residents
- *Build* Reliable and Accessible Infrastructure
- *Expand* Strong and Prosperous Businesses
- *& Promote* Innovative and Efficient Government

These are not just the seven pillars upon which my Administration has been built. They are promises for progress. Howard County will continue to recover and advance, serving as a model and a beacon of hope in our State and our Nation.

Tonight, in our inaugural public State of the County, I want to talk directly to you – our residents and business owners of Howard County. As we've spent many of the last months filled with anxiety and uncertainty, I can confidently say, the state of Howard County is strong and resilient.

Introduction

Seven months into this historic, global pandemic, we are still grappling with the effects of COVID-19 and we are bracing ourselves to withstand future impacts.

October 15th marked seven months since our first confirmed COVID-19 case and it has claimed the lives of more than 130 Howard County residents. My heart aches for every family who has lost a loved one and experienced the immeasurable grief associated with unexpected loss.

I too, recently experienced the loss of a mentor and family friend to COVID-19. Please know, collectively, our community mourns with you and we will continue to keep all of your families in our hearts and in our prayers.

From great adversity emerges enduring strength. And as we rise, Howard County remains resilient and is working towards recovery. In May, my Administration rolled out our HoCo RISE framework – a plan for Howard County to reopen innovatively, safely and effectively while serving the growing needs of our community. To continue making data-informed and people-driven decisions of safely reopening, my team evaluates:

- Confirmed cases that are positive, negative, recovered and deaths
- New hospitalizations and patients admitted to the ICU
- Available critical and intensive care beds, ventilators and test positivity rate
- Number of contact tracers per 100,000 residents
- Supply of PPE for the next 30 days

Today, I am announcing our next major step in our recovery from this pandemic.

The HoCo RISE Collaborative, which will be chaired by former County Executive Ulman, is an effort comprised of five, independent workgroups, will examine and provide recommendations in the following subject areas:

- Jobs and the economy
- Education and workforce development
- Healthcare
- Quality of life
- & Government response

Along with our HoCo Rise Taskforce, this collaborative will serve as a necessary conduit as we work to not only restore but reinvent the way we create and implement policies that will impact our community as we work to emerge from this pandemic and for years to come.

We've made incredible progress since our first confirmed case on March 15th.

Howard County flattened the curve and slowed the spread. Many of your families heeded warnings, diligently practice physical distancing and continue wearing masks, not only to protect yourself, but those all around us.

Because of you, we are saving lives.

Despite physical distancing, our community has grown closer together and built lasting partnerships to withstand hardship.

We see relatives and neighbors like you, who have become caretakers of children whose parents are essential workers and keep our community and our state running, no matter what.

And I remain grateful for our educators, who have created classrooms from dining room tables and continue teaching our children while balancing their own families.

Throughout this crisis – it has become even more evident that when we face a challenge, if we work together, we rise together.

II. COVID Response & Resiliency

Howard County was one of the first jurisdictions in the State to take bold actions, including closing our Mall in Columbia, movie theaters, and the Shops at Savage Mill.

And across our state, leaders now know that adapting swiftly and making key policy decisions early helped slow the spread of the virus and saved countless lives.

Our ability to slow the spread of COVID-19 would not be possible without our doctors, nurses and healthcare workers who without hesitation, risk their lives daily fighting on the front lines of this pandemic.

I am deeply appreciative of the quick response at Howard County General Hospital – setting up COVID-19 units, propping up surge medical tents, and establishing protocols to keep staff and patients safe.

The importance of preparation in a crisis is ingrained in any ER doctor, and it was no different for Dr. Patricia Pugh – the Vice Chair of Howard County General’s Emergency Department.

Her priority is always to make sure her patients – who she refers to as her neighbors, friends, and family - leave better than when they arrived. And as a hospital leader, she also wanted the best for her team – to keep them safe and make sure they made it home to their own families.

Many of the ER staff on the frontlines are young parents, pregnant, or caring for elderly relatives. And they all make sacrifices to care for our community. For some of the staff, that meant quarantining in a hotel for months, or isolating in their basement to avoid transmitting the virus to family members.

Early on in the pandemic, our residents joined me for a caravan, cheering on our hospital staff and showing our appreciation for their incredible work throughout this crisis.

Howard County General Hospital seamlessly collaborated with our Health Department and Fire and our Department of Fire and Rescue Services to establish protocols to keep our residents safe.

Fire and Rescue Services established hospital liaisons to assist with patient transfers. They also instituted a decontamination team to increase EMS transport turnaround time at the hospital. And by strictly adhering to proper protocols and guidance, not one fire and rescue employee contracted COVID-19 from work related patient exposure to date.

Our Health Department worked to onboard and train contact tracers, increasing from 2 to 50 to track the spread of the virus. Despite the initial shortage of COVID tests, we established testing sites and expanded immediately when more testing kits became available.

We worked to establish the COVID-19 dashboard to track and share necessary data with our community. This interactive platform continues to inform residents in real time of new cases, test positivity rates, hospitalizations, deaths and demographic information.

The Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab serves as a critical research partner as we strive to be at the forefront of COVID-19. Not only did we champion innovation with our community partners, but also within our County government.

Today, I'm happy to announce that we are doing even more to better understand this virus. We are launching a government-wide serology effort so that members of our workforce have the opportunity to determine if they have antibodies. We know the science continues to evolve, and we want to ensure that we understand all facets of this pandemic and are able to respond effectively.

Response and effective governing are critical to this Administration. Our Department of Technology and Communication Services shifted more than 1/3 of our County's workforce to telework, without a lapse in services.

We stayed connected and kept residents informed by moving quickly to virtual meetings and events, including townhalls, Budget work sessions and board meetings. These adjustments not only kept our residents up to date on critical information, but also increased civic engagement and kept our community safe.

As the virus began to take hold around the country, states and counties clamored to find and purchase PPE. And as demand spiked, federal agents seized the PPE that was bound for counties nationwide. Some individuals hoarded necessary medical equipment and illegitimate companies infiltrated the market.

Despite such obstacles, our Emergency Operations and Procurement teams were still able to acquire enough PPE for healthcare organizations and essential operations, including 300,000 units of donated PPE from generous community organizations and residents like you.

When the Governor implemented the stay-at-home order at the end of March, businesses across industries were forced to shutter. At its peak, our unemployment rate reached 8.1% in April – up from 2.7% in February. And since March, more than 55,000 Howard County residents have filed for unemployment.

Through no fault of their own – our loved ones, family, friends, and neighbors weren't sure how to afford their groceries, their bills, or their rent. As a result, we activated a variety of resources and networks to support for food distribution.

We created partnerships to improve food access with a weekly meal program for students and families in Western Howard County.

We launched new tools for families to find food distribution sites and establish areas of collection to navigate the ever-expanding need. To support hardworking farmers, we created HoCo Farm Connect, an innovative and inclusive way for residents to invest in our community farms and buy local produce.

And to boost business at our restaurants, we quickly developed HoCo Food Go, identifying which establishments offered to-go and curbside meals.

Small acts of kindness and donations throughout our community started a chain reaction – empowering residents to choose support, hope, and resiliency during this crisis.

From the very beginning, we saw people like Erika Chavarria recognize a need and mobilize a community of support.

Erika is a Howard County native and Spanish teacher at Wilde Lake High School. She has used her position over the past ten years to engage with students on a deeper level, serve as a mentor, and work towards social justice in our schools and implementing restorative practices around our community.

When schools shifted online in March, Erika knew there were students and families who would do without meals and basic necessities.

Erika immediately reached out to friends – and 40 of them pooled together funds for groceries. Six months later, this group has grown to more than 6,500 members and expanded to meet our communities increasing need.

Today, Columbia Community Care has received countless in-kind donations - from individuals, businesses, and restaurants - and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy groceries and other essentials for neighbors in need. Recently, Columbia Community Care received a Rise to the Challenge Grant of \$50,000 to continue their critical work.

From diapers to hand soap to fresh produce – the CCC has truly shown that our community cares, making more than 6,000 deliveries and serving 40,000 people at their sites.

These are the kinds of stories of collective action and kindness that remind us – when we work together, we rise together.

Around kitchen tables across the county, families are still grappling with tough choices. Many plans for the future have been put on hold indefinitely.

As parents, we are deliberating on whether to send our children to college; weighing recent financial loss or rising campus safety concerns.

Many of our college students are anxious about entering the workforce while facing and adapting to a potential economic downturn.

Many of our educators are overwhelmed. As they struggle to create an environment for learning and growth using a virtual platform – which can be difficult to navigate for our some of learners.

And our students with disabilities need additional learning supports and adaptive technology to meet their growing needs.

As parents, many of us are juggling the demands of work – whether remote or on-site – with the responsibilities of childcare and the anxiety of not knowing when this will end or if our kids are going to fall behind.

As a father of two students in our school system, I understand the careful balancing act and the dedication it takes to be a source of strength and support.

With our 50+ Centers still closed, opportunities for our aging population to connect and build relationships has been relegated to interfacing online.

And many of us are dealing with the negative mental and emotional effects of continued isolation from our friends and family, while still navigating and wondering what comes next.

Today – we still face a long road to recovery. But if we continue to work together, I truly believe that we will rise together.

III. Recovery

In late June, Howard County was granted \$57 million in Federal CARES Act funding to support COVID- 19 related government expenses and community relief programs. I remain deeply grateful for the continued advocacy of our Federal Delegation.

More than \$28 million in funding went directly to our Health Department to support critical efforts to combat the virus. We designated \$5.7 million in CARES Act funding to support struggling industries across our county through our HoCo RISE Business Grant program:

- We provided 650 grants totaling \$1.6 million to locally-owned, small retailers who were forced to shut down to maintain public safety
- We distributed agriculture assistance to 45 of our local farms.

- And through the restaurant assistance program, we granted 146 restaurants roughly \$365,000 to help keep them on their feet.
- For our robust arts community and live venues, we set aside \$750,000 to support them through this time of empty concert halls and quiet galleries.
- As tourism continues to recover, we distributed funding to 20 local hotels.
- And for one of our most critical industries – child care – we supported 247 local establishments with \$617,000 to improve safety protocols and provide support for smaller class sizes.

As much as our businesses need support – so do our neighbors and community partners.

We established Rise to the Challenge grants, awarding more than \$1.5 million to 40 non-profits providing critical services and support to our residents.

For more than 800 of our families and residents facing lost income due to COVID-19, our Department of Housing and Community Development distributed more than three and a half million dollars to provide rental assistance for up to three months.

To enable more than 500 potential homebuyers to purchase their first home in Howard County, we converted our housing workshops to online seminars. And to supplement the incredible acts of kindness around the county, we provided \$200,000 to the Howard County Food Bank to assist families facing food insecurity.

Throughout the pandemic, our Department of Community Resources and Services also served our families experiencing homelessness. We provided 68 households well-quarantine hotel rooms and conducted wellness checks, case management services and permanent housing plans through local homelessness service providers. Through community partners, we distributed more than 6,700 meals specifically for clients in non-congregate shelters.

Amidst the turmoil of this year, our team was determined to ensure Howard County reached our goal for the 2020 Census. An accurate Census count will provide critical federal funding for emergency services, head-start programs, and combatting food insecurity.

This year, we surpassed our goal for self-response in the 2020 Census – with 80.8% of residents self-reporting, exceeding our 2010 self-response rate of 76.7%. Howard County also finished 31st in the nation and 2nd in the State for our response rate.

My goal has always been to invest in critical services for every resident in our community, even in the face of an unpredictable economic outlook. Despite some federal relief, there are still significant financial gaps in our ability to respond to this crisis and keep our nation, state, and County on track.

IV. Challenges We Face in Recovery

As our government pivoted from immediate response and stabilization to the recovery phase, the concern over our imminent financial challenges grew. Despite our affluence, Howard County is not immune from fiscal challenges both prior to and post COVID-19.

The County has fared better than anticipated to date financially, due in part to cost saving measures taken as early as April. With that said, our fiscal outlook remains challenging, and is largely dependent on certain factors -- such as the duration of the pandemic, pace of economic recovery and whether there will be additional and robust federal aid.

I continue to prioritize funding for Howard County Public Schools and provided funding above Maintenance of Effort. I understand the necessity of investing in our school facilities which is why this year, my Administration supported the highest capital contribution to our schools in 14 years.

We allocated more than \$69 million in county funding for long-awaited projects; including High School #13, the Talbott Springs Elementary replacement, and the Hammond High School renovation and addition.

I am also grateful for the ongoing collaboration and advocacy of our partners in the State Delegation who understand the urgency of advancing critical capital projects in our community. On October 16th, my Administration announced the long-awaited site identification for High School 14 at Troy Park in Elkridge.

Just this month, we filed legislation to approve an installment purchase for the site for a new elementary school in Turf Valley, a long-awaited 45th elementary school to relieve overcrowding in our northern region.

And despite budget realities, due to strong management and sound fiscal policies, we protected our AAA bond rating from all three rating agencies for the 23rd year in a row. This will save taxpayers more than \$5 1/2 million in interest payments.

As one of the first counties in our nation to be evaluated during the pandemic, and at the height of financial anxiety and instability, this recognition affirms that our fiscal stewardship remains trusted.

Yet in the absence of further immediate relief at the Federal level, the State of Maryland is likely facing a projected revenue shortfall of \$100 million in FY21. This state-wide budget reality will significantly impact Howard County's financial future.

As we've learned in the past seven months – Howard County and our residents will learn, grow and rise from adversity.

V. Rising

This year amid a global pandemic and financial stress, Ellicott City residents and businesses owners continue to hold their breath every time it rains.

I know, because I feel the same anxiety too.

As County Executive, the safety of every resident and success of every business is my most important responsibility. That duty drives the urgency and focus to keep Ellicott City safe and sound for years to come.

Our Safe and Sound plan focuses on a comprehensive approach, to protect this historic town's character and the people and businesses who reside here.

This year especially, we've made significant progress on moving critical projects forward:

- We installed higher ground signage, and an electronic gate system that opens up privately owned access points to higher elevation. The tone alert system we established last year required activation twice this summer.
- With every significant storm, we clear our waterways of debris. And since I've taken office, we have removed more than 28 tons of debris from our streams.
- We have secured full funding for five of the Safe and Sound plan's key mitigation projects and anticipate that these projects will go to construction within the next 18 months, and
- We've completed preliminary research and design work on the North Tunnel project and continue to move forward with design and permitting.

After facing significant delays following the 2018 storm, the Ellicott City Master Plan is now back on track. This masterplan envisions Ellicott City's evolution for the next 20 years. In coordination with the flood mitigation plan, the master plan will move us towards a safer Main Street and thriving downtown for years to come.

Recognizing the immense value and economic vitality of downtown, world-renowned Celebrity Chef Gordon Ramsay spent a week with residents and business owners, completing beautification and renovation projects along Main Street this spring.

The two-hour premiere of his show highlighted our community's resilience to a national audience and underscored the unique appeal of our nearly 250 year old town.

We have all experienced the special charm and history of Ellicott City – for nearly 40 years Tersiguels has been a cornerstone of Main Street. I know my family and others have chosen Tersiguels to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries and other meaningful milestones.

This community treasure withstood the test of time and adversity - surviving a hurricane, a devastating fire and still managing to carry on after the 2016 and 2018 floods. When

founder and namesake Fernand Tersiguels passed this summer, the loss was felt throughout our entire community.

He and his family's love and dedication to historic Ellicott City speaks to the resilience and determination upon which our beloved Main Street is built.

This month, just up the street from Tersiguels, the 18th century Thomas Isaac Log Cabin was restored to its home at the top of Main Street. The cabin is a living piece of Ellicott City's history and will once again be open to share artifacts, exhibits and programs about the history of our town.

It is a priority of my Administration to not only safeguard Ellicott City, but all areas of Howard County experiencing the effects of climate change.

Between 1958 and 2012, the Northeast of the U.S. saw more than a 70% increase in the amount of rainfall measured during heavy precipitation events, more than any other region in the United States.

And although the year is not over, we have already seen 14 flash flood watches in Howard County, almost 3 times than what we experienced in all of 2016.

We cannot stay complacent in the global fight to slow climate change. Howard County must continue to lead with innovative technology and bold policies. Last year, we passed stronger stormwater regulations to ensure that everyone who develops in or around Ellicott City invests in adequate stormwater management infrastructure.

For nearly two decades, our Forest Conservation Act remained unchanged. In recent years the Act's out of date standards lacked real positive environmental impact. My Administration implemented the strongest forest conservation law in the State of Maryland to mitigate the loss of natural lands.

Green infrastructure can no longer be an afterthought – it must be built into how we plan and grow. We can't cut down trees in one location and replace them in another. Now, 75% of trees replaced must be within a development project site.

And we're offering incentives to encourage tree planting in the watershed and other areas that need it the most. Since taking office, we've planted more than 50,000 trees, including giving away more than 4,000 trees for residents to plant on their property.

Our commitment to sustainable growth and combating the effects of climate change and erosion of our natural lands sets an example for our neighboring jurisdictions and counties.

All of us contribute to the health of our environment, and Howard County will continue to lead on this issue. We're not just making sure trees are replanted though – we're conserving our existing green spaces.

Working with the community of Savage, the county recently purchased the Savage Remainder property using Program Open Space Funding. This nearly 5-acre parcel of land has been designated by the State of Maryland as a targeted ecological area.

And just last week, we dedicated a new green space in Downtown Columbia to Vivian 'Millie' Baily, or as most people know her – Ms. Millie. Millie is a longtime Howard County resident and served in the military during World War II.

Many of you may recognize her as the 102 year old woman who checked jumping out of a plane off her bucket list last week. Now the "Vivian C. 'Millie' Bailey Neighborhood Square," is officially open for our residents to enjoy.

Our County is known around our state and our nation for our deep agricultural history and our numerous community farmers, who provide local produce, meat, dairy, and so much more for their neighbors. We know how important it is to preserve and protect this part of Howard County.

While the prior Administration essentially ended the Agriculture Preservation Program for our rural community, we did the work and collaborated with the Board to modernize the Ag Pres Program. Today, I'm pleased to announce the Ag Preservation Board recently made its first approval in this program cycle to Charles, Denise and Alan Sharp and the Sharp Farm.

Furthermore, by launching HoCo By Design, we are moving forward with updating the General Plan – a long-range visionary outline that establishes how our county will advance and manage economic, environmental and social conditions. With extensive community engagement, this process will focus on a variety of matters, including responsible growth in our county.

For many of us, home is somewhere you feel secure and part of an inclusive community. We all want to feel and be safe in our neighborhoods. The dedicated officers in our Police Department work incredibly hard to make that a reality, but there is still more work to do. Public safety and keeping our community safe remains a top priority of mine.

For our neighbors to feel protected, they also must know that there is a support system in place when they need help. For many people who are facing substance misuse – whether alcohol, opioids, or other drugs – there is a stigma about seeking help and starting a path to recovery. Our community partners, the Health Department, and our Police and Fire Departments, have worked collaboratively to connect our neighbors in crisis with the resources and support they need.

Substance misuse has plagued our country for decades. And in recent years, we've seen a resurgence of substance misuse with the opioid epidemic. But with a focused plan of intervention and care, we've seen positive results.

In 2019, compared to the previous year, we saw a 37% decrease in opioid related deaths and a 17% decrease in non-fatal overdoses. Despite the initial downward trend, the current pandemic has now exacerbated substance misuse for many in our community. And we know there is still much work to be done.

In addition to opening the 24/7 Crisis Intervention Center at Grassroots, we have also committed \$1.5 million to open Howard County's first residential treatment center with Delphi Behavioral Health. This facility will provide a continuum of care for those living with substance use disorders.

We want all of our residents to be healthy and thriving – which is why we will continue to invest in rehabilitation and recovery.

For our community, healthy and thriving residents also means investing in a variety of ways to enhance our quality of life. Which is why we are implementing comprehensive pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure which makes us an ideal place to live for residents of all ages.

This year, the Howard County Council adopted our WalkHoward plan, building upon our Complete Streets resolution and taking us a step further towards a multi-modal community.

It has been a priority to ensure innovative pedestrian improvements that will enhance the safety of our residents and improve connectivity in our community.

These plans allow us to move forward on projects like sidewalks connecting students to schools, building critical connections between neighborhoods and businesses, and upgrading paths to be more accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Our older adult population is the fastest growing demographic in Howard County, which is why our initiatives like Complete Streets and expansion of RTA service will provide more transit options for families and older adults.

One of the goals of my Administration is to set Howard County on a path to become an AARP designated Age Friendly Community. Achieving this designation requires focused efforts on a "livable" community and making sure that Howard County is a great place to grow up and to grow older.

In 2019, we launched our HoCo S.T.R.I.V.E.S education initiative. This program is a multifaceted strategy to remove barriers and increase access to ensure mental, behavioral, academic and social learning supports for our youth.

This year, we expanded HoCo STRIVES to include more wrap around services to our vulnerable students including enrichment activities and free meal deliveries. Most importantly, with this program we are working to close the digital divide and limit the

challenges of virtual learning by providing \$1.3 million to support expanding broadband and internet services.

For many of our residents, and especially our young people – this pandemic has only further strained mental health. According to the CDC, 40% of adults reported struggling with mental health in June.

Last month, we launched the “Let’s Talk About Mental Health” campaign with our Health Department, to promote existing behavioral health resources and referral services available in the County.

Suicide was the leading cause of death for youth ages 15-19 between 2014-2016 in Howard County. This statistic is deeply upsetting and at the same time a rallying cry to provide more help to those seeking support.

I knew we had to take action to protect our vulnerable youth and prevent loss of life. That’s why last year, we launched the “It’s OK to Ask” initiative, to encourage our young people to talk about suicide prevention.

We realize how difficult this year has been. And we want you to know, it’s ok to be angry. It’s ok to grieve what we’ve lost. And it is OK to ask for help.

To further support our youth, we launched the Virtual Summer Youth Program, a five-week paid opportunity that helped students focus on career exploration and job readiness skills. Participation in our Summer Youth Program doubled compared to last year, and we empowered more than 50 of our at-risk students and our students who have disabilities.

Our youth have consistently pushed our community to be better. Howard County’s young people organized and made calls for action and change as demonstrations swept the country with demands for racial and social justice.

Shining a light on disproportionate racial and social outcomes, a small group of students organized the largest demonstration in our County’s history. Held beneath the People Tree, this peaceful rally demonstrated that we must fight for the future they deserve.

The demonstrations we saw throughout this year are just one way to make your voice heard. It’s just as critical that as citizens in our democracy, we exercise our right to vote. I’m grateful for the staff at the Howard County Board of Elections who have been working around the clock to help ensure all voters, no matter the method, are able to cast their vote in an easy, and safe manner despite the pandemic.

There are more than 227,000 Howard County residents who are registered to vote, and I encourage all of you to cast your ballots this year.

While Columbia was founded with ideals of inclusion, diversity, and equitable policies – this new generation took to the streets to remind us there is still much work to do, and we cannot take for granted the power we have to evoke change.

My Administration knows these disparities exist, and this year established a position for an Equity and Restorative Practices Manager within our Office of Human Rights and Equity. This position will identify current disparities and implement practices and policies to eliminate them.

Through restorative practices, this position will help our community in strengthening relationships and building social connections. Social disparities can range from opportunity gaps, poor health outcomes, to lack of financial access to lending and business growth.

And throughout this year, my Administration has prioritized strengthening partnerships between small, local, women, disabled, and minority owned businesses and trusted financial institutions.

Additionally, with the groundwork laid by my Administration and with our Economic Development Authority, we've made progress empowering our residents to get back to work. Our most recent unemployment rate of 5.4% , down from 8.1% in April, is one of the lowest rates in Maryland, and has decreased steadily since June.

We are putting people back to work, assisting those in need, and making sure Howard County is striving, not only to be the best overall, but for all.

Throughout this year, we have tackled many challenges, and while we're not out of the woods just yet, we know that if we work together – we rise together.

VI. Conclusion

I have the utmost faith in Howard County residents determined to lend a helping hand to our neighbors. I believe that together, we will move forward embracing opportunity and fortifying our future. In the words of the late Maya Angelou, "You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated."

I am incredibly optimistic when I hear the ways in which our community has rediscovered the connections that matter and worked to elevate one another. Every day, I see acts of kindness and glimmers of hope that we will rise above this challenging period in our Nation and in our own backyard.

It is my absolute honor to serve as your Howard County Executive.

I believe that we will never be defeated and that ultimately, we will rise together.

Stay well, be safe and remain resilient.

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