

SSJC Testimony in Opposition to Bill 39-21, Taxation – Public Safety Officers – Public Safety Emergency Communications Specialists – Property Tax Credit

My name is Jill Sege and I am testifying on behalf of the Silver Spring Justice Coalition (SSJC), a coalition of community members, faith groups, and civil and human rights organizations from throughout Montgomery County. We envision a state and county where community and individual needs for safety are met while harm by police is eliminated.

SSJC is opposed to Bill 39-21, Public Safety Officers – Property Tax Credit for the following reasons:

1. **The bill would worsen economic inequality.** Renters are the fastest growing demographic in the County. Thousands of County residents are struggling to meet their rent payments, a situation made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring housing security for people across the income spectrum is critical to meeting our community's need for public safety in a proactive and non-harmful way. Yet, the Council stands ready to provide effective \$2,500 checks each year to public safety officers or communications specialists who purchase a home.
2. **The bill would increase the racial wealth gap.** The bill would confer greater economic advantage to a sector of the County's workforce that is disproportionately white. According to a *New York Times* analysis, in 2016 the MCPD police force was 36 percentage points more white than the general population of the County. Rather than prioritizing a select and predominantly white sector of our workforce, our County's resources should be spent on measures that increase racial equity by ensuring that our most vulnerable populations are housing secure.
3. **The bill would not reduce crime.** Ostensibly, one aim of the bill is to induce police and first responders to live in the County based on the theory that more police living in the County would reduce crime. A recent *USA Today* report quotes several criminology experts who state there is no evidence to support it. We should invest in proven public safety measures, such as broad housing security.
4. **The benefit is not means-tested.** The tax credit is an economic benefit that does not take into account the financial status of the bill's beneficiaries, allowing a tax break for even very expensive homes. It is also inaccessible to people who have been unable to buy homes due to ongoing discrimination. How can the Council justify this benefit?
5. **This is a nontransparent way to increase funding for police.** Because this is a tax break, it does not show up as revenue spent, but rather as "lost revenue". The effect is significant backdoor funding for police officers. At a time when the community is asking for much-needed changes in policing in the County, Montgomery County would be rewarding officers who have not changed. We remind you of just some of the harmful acts taken by police in this County in recent years:
 - Used the N-word in dealing with the public.
 - Stood by while colleague officers used the N-word with the public.
 - Slammed Latinx community member Arnaldo Pessoa's face into the pavement while he was handcuffed.
 - Watched the assault on Mr. Pessoa and failed to intervene.

- Killed Finan Berhe, an Eritrean-American who had lost his job and was experiencing a mental health crisis; he was found holding a knife, and when he failed to respond to confusing orders, police escalated the situation, and shot and killed him.
- Killed Robert White during his neighborhood walk because he was a Black man with a tear in his jacket.
- Killed Ryan LeRoux, a young Black man, even though no police officer's life was threatened, and it was clear he was suffering a mental health crisis.
- Killed Kwamena Ocran, a young Black man, while chasing him down in plainclothes.

At a time when Montgomery County is failing to hold its police officers accountable -- especially for the numerous killings of Black men and people who are experiencing a mental health emergency -- it is callous to pass a bill increasing benefits to police officers.

6. **Instead, funding should be directed toward providing housing security.** The bill should use these same resources for renters who cannot afford to buy a home, many of whom are at risk of being homeless. Thousands of County residents are struggling to meet their rent obligations. Ensuring housing security for people across the income spectrum, including renters, the fastest growing demographic in this County, is critical to meeting our community's need for public safety in a proactive and non-harmful way.
7. **The bill neglects crucial potential beneficiaries.** Other critical first responders, such as behavioral health workers, social workers, and mental health workers are excluded from this tax benefit. These persons contribute as much to the welfare of our community as those included.

SSJC urges the Council to defeat this bill because, instead of working toward racial equity in the County, it financially rewards a flawed police department, does it in an indirect manner, and ensures that County largesse again goes to a home-owning population which is majority white.

SSJC opposes this bill.