

Good evening, my name is Nathan Feinberg. I am a lifelong resident of Montgomery County and a high school math teacher in Montgomery County Public Schools. Some of the council members here tonight may remember the story of when our family was evicted from our basement apartment by this county, due to a negligent and illegally operating landlord.

I want to stress though that our story is not an aberration, but sadly an all too common tale for the working families in our county who are victims of an acute housing crisis. The reality is simply that most families in our position do not contact the County Council or the press, and are left to fall between the cracks. But I am not here to rehash my story. With the help of many friends and by the grace of God my family was able to make it through those troubling times and now own our own home in Silver Spring. I am no longer a renter, I do not come here to advocate for my own interests. I come here to speak on behalf of the countless other families who housing injustice everyday, and to fight for a day when no family is subjected to such preventable tragedies.

Because make no mistake, this housing crisis is not an act of God, it is a policy choice. A choice that members of this council before us today have to make. I can, and have, advocated for policies that would address the specific situation that my own family endured. Financing for small landlords to bring ADUs up to code followed by strict enforcement against illegally rentals. Incentives, rather than punishment, for renters who report violations. But tonight let us focus on the root cause. What drives so many families into the informal rental market? Why are thousands upon thousands of families in this county renting illegal, unsafe units that are freely and openly advertised on Facebook, Craig's List an other spaces.

The root cause is simple: cost. Formal, safe, and legal rental options are simply too expensive for most working families. That is what drivers renters into the booming shadow market of illegal rentals; while further impoverishing those who do manage to stay in legitimate rentals. It is also what drives the under-reporting of safety issues at many lower end rentals even in the formal market. To borrow a phrase, the rent is too damn high, periodt. That is the problem.

In the work I have done organizing tenants in the greater Silver Spring area I have seen how acute the problem is, how cost concerns drive safety issues. We have talked to renters experiencing a myriad of life safety hazards from toxic mold growth to even gas leaks that go ignored and unaddressed by management. And there is a common refrain that follows: "But please don't report this to the county. I don't want to get evicted. I can't afford to live anywhere else."

I spoke at a Renter's Town Hall organized by the Renter's Alliance on the issue of illegal and unsafe ADUs and what was being done to address the issue. The response was appalling. It's "buyer beware" I was told by a leader in the Alliance. If you're renting a unit off Facebook you should have known it was sketchy. A galling admission for someone who is supposed to advocate on behalf of renters. As the anecdote above and my own family's experience clearly show, this wildly misses the point. How can a buyer beware when they have so few affordable option available to them?

It is critical that this body understand that unaffordability breeds desperation. And desperation drives renters to accept living conditions that are hazardous to their health. How many more housing related tragedies must this country endure before we realize the driving force of our life safety issue is the affordability issue and the vulnerability which it inflicts upon families?

In closing I would like to highlight who we are talking about when we discuss these issues. We are not talking just about some college students looking for a cheap place, or young bachelors eager to move out of their parents' home. We are talking about the essential workers that make our lives possible. When families are evicted or face hazardous living conditions. When families forgo medicine and meals to pay their rent. We are talking about the people who care for and teach your children, who clean your streets and pick up your trash. The people that cook and prepare your food, deliver your groceries, and mow your lawn.

So when the Council Members gathered here tonight debate and vote on these bills to begin reining in the excessive and exploitative rent increases of recent years, these are the people I want you to have in mind. Can you look your child's teacher in the eye and tell them "I want to price you out of our community." Can you look your sanitation worker in the eye and say "Thank you for picking my trash, but you cannot stay here and live amongst us." If you cannot, then it is incumbent upon you to support, strengthen and pass the rent control legislation before you. And if you can, in good conscience, say these things, then may God have mercy on your soul.