



Testimony in Support of MC-12-23 “STEP Act”
Montgomery County Council Public Hearing
April 25, 2023

Esteemed Montgomery County council members,

CASA is pleased to support MC-12-23, popularly known as “The STEP Act.” CASA is the largest immigrant and working-class rights organization in Montgomery County and Maryland. We represent over 120,000 Black and Latino families.

The STEP Act is of great importance to our thousands of Montgomery CASA members. Many of our members of color express low confidence in police officers. Our members experience emotional distress and carry the fear that interactions with officers can result in violent outcomes. The trust between community members and police officers has been hampered by racial profiling including the disproportionate targeting of people of color for traffic stops. Stanford University’s Open Policing Project Study reveals “that police stopped and searched Black and Latino drivers on the basis of less evidence than used in stopping white drivers, who are searched less often but are more likely to be found with illegal items.”

Unfortunately, stops for minor traffic offenses have resulted in several high deaths like the high profile case of Tyre Nichols. The New York Times reports that:

“Over the past five years....police officers have killed more than 400 drivers or passengers who were not wielding a gun or a knife, or under pursuit for a violent crime — a rate of more than one a week.”
“Most of the officers did so with impunity. Only five have been

convicted of crimes in those killings, according to a review of the publicly reported cases. Yet local governments paid at least \$125 million to resolve about 40 wrongful-death lawsuits and other claims. Many stops began with common traffic violations like broken taillights or running a red light; relative to the population, Black drivers were overrepresented among those killed.”

Even when these interactions do not result in deadly outcomes, these often racially motivated stops exact an unquantifiable toll on Black and brown people. Minor traffic stops, sometimes resulting in needless interrogations and searches, leave Black and Latino residents shaken and humiliated. Officers’ racial bias contributes to harsher interactions with Black and brown residents. Further, simple traffic stops with immigrants with limited English proficiency can easily escalate with the wrong officer. I ask you to consider a traffic stop where a long term Montgomery county resident with origins in a foreign country is stopped for a broken headlight. The individual stopped knows how important it is to get their license and registration. As the officer approaches, they see the driver reach for their license. The officer tells them not to reach, but the driver does not understand. A language barrier would have escalated something simple to a potentially deadly situation for the innocent driver.

Immigrant communities seem to be at a greater risk for being targeted by the police. Often living in low income communities in Montgomery County, immigrants find themselves in spaces that are more heavily surveilled by police. Take for example Hamptons Apartments in Germantown, Carroll Apartments in Quebec Terrace, Cider Mills in Montgomery Village, among many other examples; our members densely populate these locations and have reported anxiety about the increased police presence in these communities. As a result of this over-policing, low income, Black and brown, and immigrant persons are more likely to experience concentrated violence.

What better way to combat these grim statistics and experiences than by limiting the most common form of civilian interaction with police - the routine traffic stop?

CASA urges the Montgomery County Council to pass bill 12-23.