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TESTIMONY IN FAVOR OF BILL 12-23, THE STEP ACT

I am writing on behalf of the Montgomery County Democratic Socialists of America to strongly urge you to adopt Bill 12-23, the STEP Act. Montgomery County DSA has over 500 due-paying members in the county, with our membership ranging from high school students to retirees, all dedicated to furthering social and economic justice in our county.

Traffic stops and consent searches have been and continue to be used as tools for racial profiling, and they disproportionately affect people of color. This is shown in a 2022 Office of Legislative Oversight Memorandum Report in Montgomery County: Black residents made up 18% of the county population but constituted 30% of the traffic stops in 2022. Once pulled over, drivers of color are also more likely to be subjected to a search than white drivers. In 2022, the same Memorandum Report showed that Black drivers accounted for 43% of searches at routine traffic stops, while Latinx drivers accounted for 31% and Asian and white drivers were underrepresented. These glaring disparities are evidence of the ongoing discrimination and bias that is perpetuated by our county police department. We must take swift, concrete action to make our community safer for everyone by passing the STEP act.

Traffic stops can be incredibly dangerous, and even deadly, for Black and brown drivers. Between 2016 and 2021, a New York Times investigation found that police killed over 400 drivers and passengers who were not wielding a gun or knife, or under pursuit for a violent crime. Over one thousand people die at the hands of police every year, and roughly 10% of these lives are lost during traffic stops. This type of violence happens all over the United States and Maryland is not exempt. In March of this year, the family of 24 year old Demonte Ward-Blake in neighboring Prince George's county settled a police brutality lawsuit after an officer slammed Ward-Blake to the ground while he was handcuffed, breaking his neck and paralyzing him when he was pulled over for expired tags in 2019. Nationwide, Philando Castile, Samuel DuBose, Daunte Wright, and Tyre Nichols were all killed during traffic stops for minor violations. In Montgomery County, the 2022 Annual Use of Force Report stated that of the people subjected to police violence that year an overwhelming 59% were Black. 28 of these instances of force occurred during traffic stops. Passing the STEP Act can and will contribute towards preventing any more unnecessary injuries or deaths.

Additionally, for those already struggling with financial distress, routine traffic stops can have consequences far outweighing any minor infraction. Traffic fines and fees can be a significant burden for low-income individuals, and they can create cycles of debt and financial hardship. Furthermore, traffic stops can also result in more severe financial consequences, such as the loss of a job or inability to obtain employment. A traffic violation on a person's driving record can make it difficult to find employment in certain industries, particularly those that

require a clean driving record or a driver's license. This can perpetuate economic inequality and further marginalize people of color. By reducing the number of unnecessary, non-safety related traffic stops and citations, our community can avoid the economic costs associated with traffic enforcement and redirect those resources towards other public services and programs.

Furthermore, consent searches create an environment of coercion, where individuals feel compelled to comply with the officer's demands. Consent searches are also more likely to target Black and brown drivers than white drivers. They give police officers the power to search individuals and their property without any probable cause, which is a violation of our Fourth Amendment rights. Prohibiting coerced searches during traffic stops is an important step towards protecting citizens from police overstepping their power. The STEP Act can be made even stronger by amending the language to be even clearer so that police are prohibited from ever searching a car based solely on consent. The STEP Act must be passed with these changes to protect citizens' constitutional rights.

Not only will the STEP Act promote equity and justice, it will increase traffic safety. Many jurisdictions and police departments around the country have passed legislation like the STEP Act. These states and locales include Virginia, Oregon, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Seattle, West Hollywood, Memphis, and several police departments in Connecticut. It has been shown that deprioritizing low-level traffic stops and or prohibiting consent searches may have a positive effect on traffic safety. Passing the STEP Act would allow police to focus limited police resources on more serious, safety-related issues such as speeding, running red lights, and talking on a cell phone while driving. Pulling people over for something like an air freshener hanging from their rear view mirror is a waste of police resources. This bill would help maximize police time and energy, and would help make our roads safer.

It is time for us to adopt policies that reflect the needs and concerns of our communities. We must acknowledge the racial disparities present in low-level, non-public safety related traffic stops. Prohibiting low-level traffic stops and consent searches will help us build a more equitable and just society. Devoting resources to non-public safety related stops is a waste, and puts lives at risk. We can do our part to prevent physical, psychological and financial harm by passing the STEP Act. We must prioritize the safety and well-being of Black and brown people in our community by limiting unnecessary interaction with the police that could potentially be unsafe. I strongly urge you to pass the STEP Act.