

## Testimony on the Proposed Safety and Training Equity in Policing Act (STEP)

Montgomery County Council Hearing, Tuesday April 25, 2023

Good evening. I am Robert W. Brown, a member of The People's Community Baptist Church and chair of our Men's Fellowship Ministry's **Police Action Reform Committee (PARC)**. As one of the largest primarily Black congregations in the county, we know the meaning of 'driving while Black,' currently and generationally.

We therefore appreciate the opportunity to convey our support for the proposed STEP Act, which **bans minor** traffic violations such as defective taillights, illuminated license plates, and non-transparent material on windshields. We also recommend two amendments to help improve public acceptance and to strengthen the Act's purpose.

We are not anti-police. Any society that has no ability to enforce law and order is one that operates in a state of anarchy. We simply want fair and Constitutional policing for all segments of the community. And yet, as people of color, when it comes to traffic stops and searches, all too often that has not been our lived experience.

Empirical data and studies over time, nationally and locally, document racial profiling in traffic stops. A 2021 report by the **County Office of Legislative Oversight** documents disparities by race and ethnicity in traffic stops, over a five-year period. Black and Latino drivers were stopped and searched during traffic stops for **minor violations**, at disproportionately higher rates compared to White drivers. For example, for the 2018-2022 time period, Black drivers accounted for 30% of traffic stops, and 43 % of searches, even though the County Black population was only 18%.

There are several reasons why we support the STEP Act. **First**, STEP constrains the use of pre-textual traffic stops and potentially reduces racial and ethnic disparities unassociated with traffic safety. **Second**, it frees up more time for police officers to address **major** traffic violations and helps implement the County's **Vision Zero** strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries by 2030. **Third**, it builds upon the traffic stop reform experiences in jurisdictions around the country such as Oakland, California, Lansing, Michigan, Fayetteville, NC, Madison, Wisconsin, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and close by, Takoma Park. And **fourth**, STEP has the potential for building more trust between the police and the community so that citizens will be less inclined to feel they are treated unfairly.

Rather than hampering legitimate law enforcement, **STEP** moves the County police department closer to the goal recommended in the **2021 comprehensive study by the Montgomery County Policing Advisory Commission**. That body called for a new police department mission focused on effective, efficient, and equal law enforcement.

We recommend the legislation be amended to underscore **major traffic violations that are not banned**, such as reckless driving and speeding, driving under the influence of alcohol, driving with suspended license, and failure to remain at the scene of an accident.

We also strongly recommend an amendment to include legislative language that links the elimination of racial and ethnic disparities in traffic stops to related requirements in the **Maryland Police Accountability Act of 2021**. That Act requires the **Maryland Police Training and Standards Commission to develop a test and training for implicit bias**. All law enforcement agencies must use the test in the hiring process. New police officers must complete implicit bias testing and training. And all incumbent police officers must undergo bias testing and training on an annual basis.

In sum, we strongly support enactment of the **STEP Act**, with these two recommended amendments.

Thank you.