



February 23, 2024

BILL 2-24: Freedom to Leave Act – Written Testimony

Position: Favorable

Shepherd's Table is a social services organization that has provided free daily meals, clothing, mail service, an eye clinic, and many other resources primarily to the unhoused residents of Montgomery County, since 1983. We urge the Council to pass the Freedom to Leave Act to create more equitable traffic enforcement in our county, especially for the extremely vulnerable community members that reside in their vehicles. According to Giamarino et al., “safety is an important motivation for living in vehicles, suggesting that the most vulnerable [unhoused] population groups might be more likely to live in vehicles compared to other groups. Many people living in vehicles claim that they are safer and provide more stable and secure lodging than living in public spaces such as sidewalks, underpasses, or parks [\(2024\)](#).”

The Freedom to Leave Act is extremely relevant for the population we serve, especially as homelessness is rapidly increasing, and the chances of people needing to sleep in their cars grow higher with growing economic inequality. As we know, homelessness disproportionately affects Black and Brown residents of Montgomery County. In a recent survey, we found that over 80% of our meal guests identified themselves as Black or Latinx. We also know that “people experiencing unsheltered homelessness [are] 9 times more likely than people in shelters to report having spent at least one night in jail in the past six months” according to the [Urban Institute](#). Montgomery County traffic data from FY18 to FY22 reveals that Black drivers made up 30% of traffic stops in an adult population that was only 18% Black. This racial disparity in both who experiences homelessness and who experiences the most traffic stops and police encounters creates a vicious cycle, and perpetuates a power imbalance between police, and residents who may not feel comfortable denying consent due to past experiences with law enforcement.

The County's Racial Equity and Social Justice impact statement found that “Black and Latinx drivers would disproportionately benefit from limitations on consent searches. Bill 2-24 also aligns with several recommendations for reducing racial disparities in police stops. OLO evaluates Bill 2-24 to be an equitable policy through its prioritization of RESJ.” Shepherd's Table believes the Freedom to Leave Act would ultimately benefit unhoused residents living in their cars, and advance racial equity in Montgomery County. For these reasons, we urge that the Council pass Bill 2-24.