

Good evening members of the Montgomery County Council,
My name is Petros Bein, and I stand before you today as a 35-year-old black man, a firefighter, former MCPS paraeducator, and current graduate student studying to be a teacher, and a member of Young People for Progress. I am here to offer my full support for the Freedom to Leave Act, which would ban consent searches in Montgomery County. Having lived in this county since childhood and now residing in Clarksburg, I have, regrettably, directly experienced the impact of racist policing practices.

One vivid incident happened when I was 14. I was walking near Lakeforest Mall with a friend after school. The police searched us, even though we did not have any prohibited items, and my friend was forcefully slammed onto the hood of a police car. We were just two young boys walking home from school, but were treated like criminals.

As I grew older, the stops did not cease. In Germantown, an officer pulled me and my friends over for a minor traffic stop— a supposedly malfunctioning license plate. Despite not engaging in any illegal activities, we were interrogated and our car was searched, leaving us scared and bewildered. It was clear we were targeted based on racial stereotypes and our skin color.

These experiences prove that consent searches are not a choice, but a survival tactic. Officers conduct consent searches when they don't have evidence that we did a crime. I have repeatedly said that we did not have prohibited items during these incidents. Our only crime was that we were walking or driving while Black in Montgomery County. Even if I had been given the choice to consent to a search, my previous negative interactions with police would absolutely pressure me into saying yes. These are the realities we face, and they underscore the urgent need for change.

The Freedom to Leave Act is a crucial step toward ensuring all community members are treated with dignity and respect by law enforcement. The coercive tactics used in "consent" searches breed fear and distrust toward law enforcement, undermining community safety and cohesion. Banning them is an essential step towards restoring community trust in the police.

I know what it's like to be a public servant and how to best serve the community. This bill would empower drivers with the freedom of movement, without fear of being unfairly targeted and searched because of their skin color. . It's time to drive towards racial justice, not away from it. Please support the Freedom to Leave Act and ban consent searches!

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Petros Bein