

Testimony Before the Montgomery County Council

On the Freedom to Leave Act

February 27, 2024

President Friedson, Chair Jawando, and Members of the County Council

For the record, my name is Phillip Harmon, I am a District 5 resident and have been a Montgomery County resident, taxpayer, and homeowner for more than 20 years.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective on Bill 12-23 – (Police – Traffic Stops – Limitations, legislation) or the STEP Act that has been withdrawn. I, like many who appeared before you last April, was encouraged to support the fundamentals of the legislation. I commend the Council for your public safety efforts and despite the analysis shared by the Attorney General on the original bill, I believe you are on the right track, for the right reasons. Now we are considering the Freedom to Leave Act, from my understanding a far more limited proposal that shares just a few of the STEP Act provisions.

While I will support the Freedom to Leave Act, I ask that you will be undeterred in revisiting the broader provisions of the Step Act in concert with the office of the Attorney General, to craft legislation that both addresses our shared priorities and is in alignment with state law.

I am compelled to restate that for this or any other legislation to be effective we must revise the relationship between our law enforcement representatives and the community. Crime is not a welcome neighbor, but for the sake of our county, we must resist the narrative that a contentious relationship with police is a necessary evil to accept in order to address imagined rampant lawlessness.

Our officers are public employees. They have families who want to see them return home safely every day. We greatly enhance their safety and effectiveness by forging an atmosphere of trust within the community. This starts with how and when our officers interact with the community.

Any and every effort to prevent “over-policing” through traffic stops and searches which may lead to animosity, a lack of cooperation with law enforcement, or possibly altercations, is a win for all residents.

Respect must be earned. We will never intimidate our way to safety through a targeted, persistent or agitating police presence. Nor should we set up our residents to fail,

particularly our youth, by finding ways to get them on the road to a criminal record. At this level, policing can take on a negative economic impact. Consider for some individuals the threat to jobs or economic opportunity that lasts a lifetime, for shop owners lost sales and ultimately lower taxes paid to the county, and with lower taxes, cuts to public services.

While this may seem an extreme example, it is to demonstrate that seemingly innocuous policies have consequences. We have the power to avoid such an outcome. This legislation is a start and I encourage the Council to adopt it fully, even as you search for options to further improve it.

Phillip G. Harmon

