

Monday, December 9, 2024

Affordable Housing Advocacy

Good day, esteemed members of the County Council Committee,

My name is **FirstLady Monica Elisheva Bradley**, and I am advocating for urgent and equitable housing solutions that specifically address the needs of Black men in Montgomery County, Maryland. I understand that there is a County Council hearing scheduled for tomorrow, and I wanted to share my thoughts with you ahead of time so that you can have a fuller and more informed conversation during the discussion.

Montgomery County is often heralded for its diversity and recently recognized as one of the best places to live in the United States. Yet, behind this accolade lies a sobering reality: Black men, particularly Indigenous Black Americans, continue to face systemic barriers that jeopardize their ability to secure affordable and emergency housing.

The numbers speak volumes. According to Montgomery County's "2022 Annual Report on Homelessness," overall homelessness has decreased by 41% over the last decade. However, Black residents—especially Black men—remain disproportionately affected. Black individuals make up 60% of the county's homeless population, despite constituting only 19% of its residents. These disparities are not merely statistical anomalies; they are symptoms of systemic inequities that demand immediate action.

Furthermore, the recent growth and diversity of the Black population in the U.S., as highlighted in the Pew Research Center article, focuses on Black immigrants, but it overlooks the contributions and experiences of native-born Black Americans, including Indigenous Black (brown-skinned) Americans. These individuals, descendants of enslaved Africans, have long been integral to American society and are often excluded from discussions centered on immigrant populations. This gap underscores the need for a more inclusive understanding of Black American identity and its unique historical and social contexts—a deeper discussion that too many avoid.

On top of that, these housing disparities are compounded by the troubling intersection with the criminal justice system. Black individuals are incarcerated at much higher rates than their White counterparts—nationally, Black people are imprisoned in state prisons nearly five times more often. Have you ever asked yourself why? Upon reentry, many formerly incarcerated Black men face insurmountable barriers to securing stable housing. These challenges trap them in a vicious cycle of poverty and instability, making it even harder for them to reintegrate into society and thrive.

The Pew Research Center highlights the growth of Black immigrants but overlooks the experiences of native-born Black Americans, including Indigenous Black Americans. This gap exacerbates social inequities, especially in housing. We can change this now—give them what

they deserve: a seat at the table, fair opportunities for emergency affordable housing, and make them a priority. They have suffered long enough.

This cycle reflects more than a failure of individual systems; it reveals an erosion of opportunity for Black men in Montgomery County. The confluence of systemic racism, economic marginalization, and mass incarceration has not only hindered their independence but also locked them out of pathways to prosperity. Without access to stable housing, the possibility of breaking these cycles—much less achieving generational wealth—becomes a distant dream.

Montgomery County espouses values of inclusion, equity, and opportunity. Now is the time to act on those principles by prioritizing policies that address these urgent disparities. I urge the committee to:

1. **Expand emergency housing programs** tailored to the unique needs of Black men, particularly those reentering society after incarceration.
2. **Invest in long-term affordable housing solutions** that include wraparound services, such as job training, mental health support, and legal assistance.
3. **Commit to data-driven accountability**, ensuring that resources are allocated equitably to close the gap for Black residents disproportionately affected by housing instability.

These actions are not just about housing; they are about restoring dignity, empowering individuals, and ensuring that every resident of Montgomery County has the opportunity to thrive—not just survive.

I know what it feels like to be overlooked, to be born in America yet left out of the conversation. Discrimination was a constant shadow in my life, but housing saved me. It gave me not just a place to stay, but a foundation to rebuild. Now, as I stand up for those who feel the same heat of exclusion and the sting of being forgotten, I urge you to consider the impact of policies that leave people like me behind. No one should ever have to feel invisible—everyone deserves a chance to be seen and supported.

Thank you for your time, your attention, and your commitment to addressing this pressing issue. Together, we can create a Montgomery County where opportunity truly knows no barriers.

References:

- Montgomery County Interagency Commission on Homelessness. *2022 Annual Report on Homelessness*.
- The Sentencing Project. *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons*.
- Pew Research Center, "Key findings about Black immigrants in the U.S.," January 27, 2022.