SB0970- SUPPORT
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SB0970 Written Support
Fire Protection and Prevention-Sprinker Systems and Smoke Alarms- Requirements
(Melanie Diaz Sprinkers Save Lives Act)

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
March 15th, 2023

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

My name is Alan Pickett and I am a Silver Spring resident, and neighbor of Melanie Diaz's fiancé, Michael Sabolvarro, and I am writing in support of SB 0970. On Saturday, February 18th 2023 an early morning apartment fire in Silver Spring MD resulted in the death of Melanie Diaz, a recent Georgetown alumna and current staff at Aspen Institute as a Program Coordinator within its Energy and the Environment Program. As a friend and neighbor over several years, I am deeply fond of Michael and his family, and grew to enjoy and appreciate Melanie as an integral member. My respect and admiration for Melanie grew as I learned about her principled life and work on climate change at the Aspen Institute, her love and care for animals, and her loving and total immersion in Michael's large family, as she became a cherished friend to Michael's siblings, nieces and nephews, and truly loved by Michael's mother, Maria, and grandmother, Linda.

When I was informed of Melanie's death, I was seized with shock, but the emerging details are enough to leave anyone gobsmacked with despair: I believe that Melanie was the only person who died as a result of the fire. It appears clear that Melanie did everything she was "supposed to do" in the event of such an emergency: she immediately harnessed her dogs, exited the apartment, and entered the nearest staircase. A stairwell door with evacuation signage is present immediately opposite what was Melanie's apartment door. She was found lying in the hallway two floors below her own unit, having succumbed to smoke inhalation, one arm protectively embracing the dogs she shared with Michael. She had removed her own jacket, wrapping it around the dogs to protect them from the smoke. I was among the family and neighbors who received Michael when he returned home from the apartment that Saturday. He emerged from his car cradling the body of Melanie's dog Ella, his hands covered in black ash, and collapsed into the arms of his waiting family, weeping openly as he greeted each of them; his sisters, brother, mother, and extended family. It's just a devastatingly cruel reversal that, by Saturday

afternoon, Michael had lost the future he envisioned for himself when he arose that morning. He lost his life-partner, and the world lost an engaged and hopeful person, a person our world cannot afford to lose right now.

As it happens, had the apartment complex in which Melanie lived had an up-to-current-code sprinkler and alarm system, she and the dogs would very likely be alive today. Tragically, Melanie's apartment did not have a smoke detector or sprinkler System. The hallways of the complex do not have a smoke detector. My understanding is that the alarm had to be manually activated by a resident who blindly crawled on all fours through the smoke in his hallway. He had to pull the alarm TWICE before it worked.

Sprinklers and smoke alarms are not something I pay much attention to as I move around in the world, and I doubt that many of us do. But as a witness to the heartbreak visited on Michael and Melanie's families, I cannot accept the idea of high rise apartments without modern means of effectively alerting residents to danger, mitigating the damage, and stopping the fire as close to the source as possible, as quickly as possible. I am aware that Montgomery County has had other high-rise fires in recent years in older buildings without modern systems. It is deeply unsettling to contemplate the potential for future loss of life, future heartbreak, future suffering if the need for building improvements is not addressed.

I urge a favorable report on SB0970.

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