



Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony
SB970 - Fire Protection and Prevention – Sprinkler Systems and Smoke Alarms – Requirements
(Melanie Diaz Sprinklers Save Lives Act)
March 16, 2023
SUPPORT

TO: The Honorable Brian Feldman, Chair; The Honorable Cheryl Kagan, Vice Chair; and Members of the Education, Energy, the Environment Committee
FROM: Dr. Jeffery Johnson, Chair, Montgomery County Community Action Board

The Montgomery County Community Action Board (CAB), the County’s local, state, and federally designated anti-poverty group, is in full support of SB970 and asks the Committee for a favorable report. This bill would address an important safety issue by requiring all high-rise buildings to install automatic sprinkler systems by January 1, 2033 and requiring smoke alarms in all public corridors starting July 1, 2023. Residents will also be informed in writing through their leases and signs throughout the building when an automatic sprinkler system is not available.

The CAB supports this bill because it takes important steps to protect lower income residents, a disproportionate number of whom live in older buildings without the latest fire safety protections. Sadly, on far too many occasions, the Takoma-East Silver Spring (TESS) Community Action Center and the agency’s Navigation Unit have seen firsthand the devastating impact that fires and explosions have on lower-income residents. As part of the County’s Emergency Management Mass Care Operations team, Community Action staff and contractors work to address the immediate and ongoing needs of residents affected by these emergency situations. Our board receives regular updates on their incredible efforts, including their work addressing the needs of residents displaced by the recent fire at the Arrive Silver Spring apartment building, where Melanie Diaz, for whom this bill is named, was tragically killed.

Our board recognizes that the very high cost of housing in Montgomery County, and so many other parts of the state, is an important factor to consider. Lower-income residents often cannot afford to live in newer buildings that are already required to have sprinkler systems in place. According to the Maryland Community Action Partnership’s most recent report, the Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Standard for a household with two working adults, one preschooler, and one school-age child is now \$122,943, over four times the federal poverty level.¹ This same family is estimated to need \$1,934 each month just to pay for housing. The extremely high cost of living often leaves lower-income residents with far fewer options for housing and other necessities. Basic safety measures should not be a luxury for those who can afford them; they should be

¹<https://maryland-cap.org/the-maryland-2023-self-sufficiency-standard-calculator/>

available to all residents regardless of income. We therefore encourage the Committee to explore other policies that will enhance safety and support lower-income residents, such as rental assistance and funding to help residents purchase renters insurance.

The CAB strongly supports SB970 and asks the Committee for a favorable report.