



**Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony**  
**HB823: Fire Protection and Prevention - Residential Rental Property - Requirements**  
**(Melanie Nicholle Diaz Fire Safety Act)**  
**February 20, 2024**  
**SUPPORT**

TO: The Honorable Marc Korman, Chair; The Honorable Regina Boyce, Vice Chair; and Members of the Environment and Transportation 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 support of HB823 and asks the Committee for a favorable report. This bill would require smoke detectors in public corridors in all high-rise buildings and emergency escape lighting. It will also require high-rise buildings that do not have sprinkler systems to post signs informing tenants and visitors of this fact and to include this information in lease agreements. HB823 includes additional fire safety requirements and calls on state agencies to help building owners find funding to install sprinkler systems. Although these measures are critical, the CAB also recommends an amendment to the bill that would require high-rise apartment buildings to install sprinkler systems, a step that would significantly improve safety in the event of a fire.

The CAB supports this bill and recommends the added amendment because this bill 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 2023 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 equipped with sprinkler systems and other safety measures. According to the Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Standard, a household with two working adults, one preschooler, and one school-age child needs to earn \$122,943 to cover their

basic necessities, over four times the federal poverty level.<sup>1</sup> 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 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 supports HB823 and asks the Committee for a favorable report.

---

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