

New Bill Mandates Transparency in Police-Shooting Investigations

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FULL TEXT

The police-involved shooting death of Silver Spring, Maryland, resident Robert Lawrence White last summer, and the events that followed, brought to light fears of Black Montgomery County residents who question the county police departments capacity to be honest about its shortcomings.

Later this month, a bill introduced by Montgomery County Council member Will Jawando (D-At Large) that addresses this issue will make its way to the council's public safety committee.

If passed, the Law Enforcement Trust and Transparency (LETT) Act will mandate an independent investigation of police-involved shooting deaths in Montgomery County and the release of a report in cases where an officer didn't receive charges.

"Now we're tasked with how to move forward, learning from these incidents and turning a moment of anger, confusion, and frustration into an opportunity to make positive change in how we administer justice," Jawando said in January as he introduced the LETT Act, his first piece of legislation in his role, before the Montgomery County Council.

Currently, as part of an agreement between Montgomery County and Howard County, the latter's prosecutorial team will investigate criminal matters involving the former's police department, and vice versa. Under the LETT Act, however, two independent investigators, both of which must be employed by a local, state, or federal agency, would take the lead on those types of cases. The findings of any state attorney's report absolving officers of wrongdoing must fulfill the tenets of the Maryland Public Information Act.

Co-sponsors of the LETT Act include Montgomery Council President Nancy Navarro (D-District 4) and Council members Gabe Albornoz (D-At large), Craig Rice (D-District 2), and Hans Riemer (D-At large). Organizations that have expressed support for this legislation include the Montgomery County chapters of the NAACP and American Civil Liberties Union, and Mothers of Black Boys United for Social Change.

"We've already taken a leadership step in this council with prosecutorial shares with Howard County," Jawando said during the Jan. 15 legislative meeting. "This is another way we can lead in Montgomery County for our community members to feel safe and our officers to do their jobs."

In June, Montgomery County Police Officer Anand Badgujar shot and killed White, 41, on the 9200 block of Tree Oaks Drive in Silver Spring during an investigation into suspicious activity.

In the aftermath of White's death, Badgujar, who had been with the department for two years at that point, went on paid leave and Howard County officials launched an investigation. That process took three months with what advocates described as little evidence supporting the state attorney's decision.

Marvin Whitfield, White's friend of 35 years, counted among the group of people and organizations that converged on the Montgomery County Council building in Rockville during a March 6 press conference. Though he said he remains hopeful in LETT's passage, he expressed a desire that the bill remain intact and potent.

"We're living on the outskirts of the nation's capital and we're not as progressive as them. There's a tide of change and people won't stop until it changes," said Whitfield, a Prince George's County resident and human resources professional. "I hope the bill doesn't get muddled down. We're here because of what we want with the independent council and greater transparency. It's about humanizing people - Rob wasn't some thug or a crazy man trying to

beat up cops."

Sidebar

The police-involved shooting death of Silver Spring, Maryland, resident Robert Lawrence White last summer, and the events that followed, brought to light fears of Black Montgomery County residents who question the county police department's capacity to be honest about its shortcomings.

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