

# MoCo Police-Shooting Investigation Transparency Bill Signed into Law

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## FULL TEXT

Montgomery County's Law Enforcement Trust and Transparency (LETT) Act, signed into law earlier this month, comes amid tense relationships between law enforcement and Black residents, as seen in recently released body-cam footage that shows a white officer using a racial epithet during an encounter.

For Montgomery County Councilmember Will Jawando (D-At large), the law's architect and key proponent, the LETT Act increases accountability in the aftermath of officer-involved shootings, and provides the opportunity for the county's police department to build more of a trusting relationship with members of the community.

"We still have some issues in Montgomery County," Jawando said on May 7, moments after the Montgomery County Council unanimously approved the LETT Act, his first bill as an elected official. More than a week later, County Executive Marc Elrich signed it into law.

Under the LETT Act, two independent investigators employed by a local, state, or federal agency would take the lead on cases where a civilian died during an encounter with a Montgomery County police officer. Reports finding officers blameless in those situations must fulfill the tenets of the Freedom of Information Act. In years past, cases of this magnitude would go to the Howard County State Attorney's office.

"[T]his would go in the right direction of making sure that when our police officers are involved in the death of a resident, we have an independent investigation and that the report be made public so the community can look at and learn from it. We have a unique opportunity with a new police chief," Jawando added.

In a statement to The Washington Informer, Montgomery County Police Department Public Information Officer Captain Tom Jordan said that the department supports any effort, including the LETT Act, to increase transparency and trust within the community.

Jawando introduced the LETT Act in January in response to concerns that the investigation of Silver Spring resident Robert Lawrence White's death hadn't been transparent.

Last June, Montgomery County Police Officer Anand Badgujar shot and killed White during an investigation into suspicious activity. After three months, the Howard County State Attorney's Office absolved Badgujar of any wrongdoing, to the chagrin of activists who said little evidence supported that outcome.

Long before May 16, when Elrich signed it into law, the LETT Act had the support of Montgomery County Council President Nancy Navarro (D-District 4), Councilmembers Gabe Albornoz (D-At large), Craig Rice (D-District 2), and Hans Riemer (D-At large), the Montgomery County chapters of the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union, and Mothers of Black Boys United for Social Change.

Also among the LETT Act's most ardent advocates was Marvin Whitfield, the late White's friend of more than three decades. For him, LETT's passage earlier in the month brought mixed feelings.

"The reason for us having to deal with this was my brother's untimely murder. His death won't be in vain, but we never needed to get here," said Whitfield, now a Prince George's County resident and human resources professional.

"Things are still going on in the community where proper policing isn't being done," he continued. "I applaud Councilmember Jawando for this bill, but I wish we didn't need the LETT Act, and that common civility was common. This was never intended to slam the police. They are people with families that care for them, however the

main goal is that they're here to serve and protect the community."

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