

April 9, 2024

Montgomery County Council Public Safety Committee Members,

My name is Kelli Dominique Hudson. I live in Montgomery County, Silver Spring. I'm here today as a concerned community advocate, to bring your attention to a critical issue that demands our immediate attention and action – the disproportionate rate at which Black children go missing, the inadequacies of the current AMBER alert system, and the need to fund the implementation of an Ebony alert system.

Since moving to Maryland from Ohio 7 years ago with my 2 daughters, safety has been my number one concern. Transplanting here as a single mother who's left their support system back in OH, meant we had to start from scratch to create a sense of community and friends. One of our friends who became more like family is Mariah and her daughter Chris. Chris and his mother Mariah are also transplants from New Jersey and had lived in Montgomery County for the last 10 years. In early September, shortly after beginning 10th grade at a high school in Gaithersburg, Chris relocated to a new apartment with Mariah northern Virginia. Just a week after settling in, Mariah arrived home from day shift, as usual and awaited for Chris to arrive from school. He never showed up. It was revealed by school cameras that Chris left school early. Mariah also noticed many of Chris' essential belongings were gone too.

Initially, Mariah was in disbelief hoping Chris would walk through the door any moment. She would remain waiting from September 2023 to March 2024. While missing, Chris while missing, seemed to have fallen in between the cracks. Mariah expressed feeling sick to her stomach like being on an endless roller coaster ride. I'm advocating on behalf of Mariah and other families with similar lived experiences, to raise awareness about the barriers that Black youth face when they go missing.

Chris like many of America's Black children are missing at disproportionately high rates where racial biases lead to insufficient media coverage, perpetuating a cycle of unsolved cases. The AMBER Alert system, though effective, fails to adapt to the unique challenges faced by missing Black children. Strict criteria result in many being labeled as runaways, with little visibility in media coverage, and delayed law enforcement response, and investigation time– a flaw that has proven tragic in many cases.

The 2019 AMBER Alert Report indicates that 59% of children who received an AMBER Alert were successfully recovered by individuals or law enforcement officials. This underscores the importance of timely alerts in ensuring the safe return of missing children.

I urge you, esteemed members of the County Council, to consider the implementation of an Ebony Alert system in our community. This alert system, designed to specifically address the racial disparities in missing children cases, could be a crucial step towards ensuring the safety and recovery of Black children who go missing.

By adopting an Ebony Alert system, we can bridge the gap in media coverage, prevent delays in response time, and rally the community to actively participate in the search for missing children. A new law in California which went into effect January 1st of 2024, creates an emergency alert system aimed to find missing Black youth between the ages of 12-25. California's progressive law underscores the urgent need for a more inclusive and effective alert system that prioritizes the safety and well-being of all our children.

I implore you to consider implementing an Ebony Alert system in our community. This tailored alert can bridge the media coverage gap, expedite response times, and unite our community in finding missing Black children. Our County can lead in championing this cause, prioritizing the safety of every child, regardless of their background. Let us act urgently to protect our community's children.