



Testimony

by

Ziyadah Amatul-Matin,
Member
Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice

Submitted to

Joint Legislative Public Hearing
Senate Crime Victim, Crime and Correction Committee and
Assembly Corrections Committee

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Thank you, Senator Julia Salazar and Assemblymember Eric Dilan, for holding this joint legislative hearing on the Safety of Persons in Custody, Transparency, and Accountability within State Correctional Facilities. My name is Ziyadah Amatul-Matin and I am a member of the Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice. I stand here today fighting for my deceased brother and for my son who is currently incarcerated.

For decades, state prisons across New York have failed to keep our incarcerated loved ones safe. With the recent killing of Robert Brooks and Messiah Nantwi in state prisons, we are at a critical moment. Too many lives have been lost by this cruel system. My brother Ramadan Mubarak Ibn Abdul-Mateen died at Wende Correctional facility because of the lack of access to medical care and excessive force. While detained, he experienced so much pain at the hands of correctional officers. Words cannot express the pain that I/we feel to have a loved one die behind bars and not be able to be there with them to take care of them in their last hours.

My brother deserved better. Robert Brooks deserved better. Messiah Nantwi deserved better. I'm so sick and tired of our loved ones being abused, mistreated, medically neglected, and murdered by this cruel criminal legal system disguised as Justice.

I have a son, Rashad Abdul-Matin, who is currently incarcerated in a New York State Prison. He is also experiencing the same horrific conditions my brother faced. He's been starved, medically neglected, and physically abused. My son is diabetic and has had many medical complications that need urgent care, but it can take months for him to see a doctor. The excuse he is given is that they are short-staffed. That is not acceptable. Access to medical care should not be an option but a right! This is why my family have requested a motion to have his sentence pardoned or to place him under community supervision. It is clear to us that every day that he remains in prison his life is at risk.

As family members, we shouldn't have to grieve our loved ones or worry daily about their well-being while detained at a New York State Correctional Facility. Yet, that is the current reality we face. The New York State Legislature should do everything possible to pass reforms needed to address the horrible conditions in prisons by increasing oversight and shutting down dangerous and deadly facilities. A necessary step in this process is to overhaul the State Commission of Correction (SCOC).

In this year's budget, the Legislature already increased the funding of the SCOC to \$7.1 million – an increase of \$3 million from last year's budget – and strengthened oversight and accountability provisions. We urge the Legislature to build on the reforms included in the budget and expand the SCOC by passing (S. 856)-Salazar / (A.2315)-Gallagher.

The State Commission on Correction is an independent body mandated with the constitutional authority to ensure that correctional facilities across New York – all local jails and state prisons – are “safe, stable and humane.” The SCOC has wide-ranging power to hold jails and prisons in compliance, by conducting inspections, obtaining information from correctional staff, examining DOCCS documentation and medical records, issuing subpoenas, and more. The commission also has the power to shut down correctional facilities found to be out of compliance. But for more than 20 years the SCOC has consistently failed to meet its responsibility. That’s why we’re working on legislation to fix the SCOC by bringing greater accountability so that it meets its mandate with regard to prison oversight throughout the state.

This legislation will expand the number of commissioners from three to nine and distribute appointments among the Governor, the Senate, the Assembly, and the Correctional Association of New York. The appointment requirements would guarantee a diversity of backgrounds, including in public health, behavioral healthcare, prisoner’s rights litigation, and personal experiences of incarceration.

Support for this legislation is growing, with over 90 community, legal, advocacy, and faith-based groups demanding the immediate passage and nearly 50 legislators signed on as co-sponsors.

We urge the legislature to urgently pass this legislation to help address the crisis unfolding in New York State prisons. Lives are at stake and the clock is running out. Our families and communities deserve better.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.