

Testimony for the Joint Public Hearing: Safety of Persons in Custody, Transparency, and Accountability within State Correctional Facilities

Submitted by Justyna Rzewinski, LCSW, PhD(c)

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. My name is Justyna Rzewinski, and I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, PhD candidate, and proud member of Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement (SWASC). I am writing to express my strong support for the End Health Professionals' Complicity in the Torture of Detained or Incarcerated Individuals Act of 2025.

This legislation represents the kind of systemic change I desperately wished for during my time working inside one of the most violent jails in the country: Rikers Island. From December 2023 through September 2024, I was a clinical supervisor overseeing two mental health units, which housed severely mentally ill individuals.

During those nine months, I witnessed a consistent violation of human rights. Patients with mental illness were subjected to an unofficial but widespread practice called "deadlocking", being locked in their cells 24 hours a day for weeks or even months at a time. They were denied medication, showers, sunlight, and all meaningful human contact. These were not isolated cases. For many, this was the daily reality, sanctioned by silence and normalized by routine. When I could no longer ethically remain in that environment, I resigned and testified before the New York City Board of Correction on October 8th, 2024. I described the use of deadlocking and the broader failures in care. That testimony sparked media coverage and ultimately a formal investigation by the Department of Investigation. But it should never have required that kind of risk or public pressure to raise alarms about abuse. What I experienced not only happened in Rikers, but it is also a reflection of what occurs in prisons.

What was most shocking to me, beyond the cruelty of what I witnessed, was the complete absence of a formal, protected mechanism for reporting human rights violations as a healthcare provider inside a carceral setting. I was forced to go to the media because there was no process that could guarantee I would be heard, let alone protected.

Had legislation like this existed then, I could have remained in my role, fighting for my patients from within the system rather than exposing it from the outside. This bill is not abstract for me; it is deeply personal. It represents the safeguards I needed, and the moral clarity we must demand from our institutions.

The urgency of this legislation has only deepened in the wake of horrific cases like the death of Robert Brooks, killed in a medical unit while nurses stood by, and Messiah Nantwi. These tragedies are not anomalies. They are symptoms of a culture that devalues the lives of incarcerated people and silences the professionals who try to advocate for them. I am deeply grateful to Senator Salazar and Assemblymember Kelles for championing this legislation and to all those advancing it. It is a critical and overdue step toward ensuring that health professionals are empowered and obligated to uphold their ethical responsibilities, even

behind bars. No one should have to choose between protecting their license and protecting their patients. And no one should ever suffer in silence because a clinician was too afraid or unsupported to speak up.

I didn't leave Rikers because I stopped believing in my patients; I left because the system made it impossible to protect them. But I have never stopped carrying their stories, suffering, and hope. This bill is the first absolute acknowledgment that health professionals should never be forced to choose between their ethics and employment.

We are not meant to be silent witnesses to torture. We are healers. Pass this bill, for those still behind the walls, for those we've already lost, and for every provider who wants to do what's right but fears the cost. Let us end complicity. Let us begin accountability.