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**Testimony from Messiah Ramkissoon,
Associate Executive Director of the Youth Justice Network
Before the Joint Public Hearing: Safety of Persons in Custody, Transparency,
and Accountability within State Correctional Facilities
May 14, 2025**

Good morning. My name is Messiah Ramkissoon and I am Associate Executive Director of the Youth Justice Network.

I would like to thank Chairs, Senator Julia Salazar and Assembly Member Erik Dilan, along with the other members of the committees of this joint hearing, for the opportunity to address you today.

The Youth Justice Network is a NYC citywide non-profit whose mission is to break cycles of incarceration and help build a more equitable justice system that provides young people individualized advocacy, mentorship, and opportunities to grow, thrive and lead.

I am here today to talk about the life and experience of Messiah Nantwi. Before Messiah at 22 years-old was brutally beaten to death by officers at Midstate Correctional Facility, he was well known at the Youth Justice Network as one of our youth members.

Messiah would visit often, sitting and speaking with his mentors. I am proud to say I was one of those mentors. In addition to sharing a name, Messiah and I shared real time together. We both lived at a certain point in our lives on 129th Street in Harlem, and our paths would occasionally cross in the neighborhood. He was a hopeful, soft-spoken, intelligent teen who devoured books.

Messiah appreciated our arts and mentorship programs and was an active participant in our youth photography workshops. He participated in our financial literacy sessions for young people and possessed an entrepreneurial spirit, launching his own clothing line called, “Viva La Freedom.” Messiah also loved music and would engage with our music studio partner Audio Pictures, where he would record and exercise with the music team.

He wanted to travel the world and once asked us why a kid had to get into trouble to have access to a program like the Youth Justice Network. He also told us it was easier for him to get a gun than it was a book. We often call to check in on our youth members, and in Messiah’s case, he was reciprocal in the sense that he would call to check in on me.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the Youth Justice Network's borough headquarters was closed, and our young people, including Messiah, lost their consistent hub of support within the neighborhood. Messiah's phone was disconnected, and we did not hear from him for months.

The next time we heard from Messiah was when at age 18, he was arrested in a Bronx incident that started as a graffiti stop and ended with his being shot by the police – Messiah was shot 28 times by the police to be exact. After his miraculous survival, Messiah's case proceeded through the court system, during which he worked on his physical rehabilitation and recovery. He worked hard to do well and tried to get his life back on the right track. With support from his mentors, he took coding classes, was admitted to college and filled out his financial aid forms.

But by then his time in the justice system had done its job, and the joy in Messiah's eyes had faded, his hope for his future extinguished, and his mental health severely compromised. His pain was palpable. Messiah ultimately pled guilty to criminal possession of a weapon and was sentenced to a 5-year period of imprisonment that eventually brought him to Mid-State Correctional facility.

At age 22, instead of getting a college diploma, he was beaten to death on March 1, 2025, by the very people meant to protect him - New York State correction officers. At the time, Messiah was awaiting trial, indicted for the shooting death of two people – one of whom was only 19 years old.

There are thousands of kids out there like Messiah that have been, and continue to be, victimized by a system that prefers to imprison its youth rather than provide them with the opportunity to succeed.

I urge the committee members not to allow Messiah Nantwi to die in vain and do something to lift our communities and each other by prioritizing young people's safety and wellbeing through opportunity, access to support and services, and positive community networks.

Please break the cycle of knee-jerk responses like more imprisonment, fewer parole opportunities, and harsher sentences for adolescents. These short-sighted policy initiatives only lead to misery, a costly human and financial toll, and solve little when it comes to equal justice, public safety, and the mass incarceration of Black and brown young people.

I urge the committee to take concrete action in response to this trauma, pain, and loss.

I would urge you to pass Assembly Bill A767 and Senate Bill S643 that would establish a Youth Justice Innovation Fund to make funds available to community-based organizations for services and programs with the purpose of preventing youth arrest and incarceration and promoting positive youth development.

These bills would fund violence prevention services, diversion, alternatives to detention, placement and incarceration, post-release support, and education and employment for young people up to the age of 25.

Young people can only grow, gain a voice and fully realize their power and worth when they can feel safe, cared for, learn, play, and experience a world outside themselves. We must commit to leveraging their promise before it turns to pain, they cannot return from - as it did for Messiah Nantwi.

I would like to leave this committee with something that was conveyed to me by Messiah's aunt, Mayreni Lopez.

“Messiah had a chance, but his dreams were tarnished by 27 undeserving bullets that forever changed his life. Through his traumatized mind, he was still reaching for his dreams and visions. His trauma/paranoia, unfortunately, affected more individuals to feel the same pains he went through. Messiah had a brilliant mind, a heart that wanted to help those around him, and a soul that could impact everyone that met him. His death was unnecessary, cruel, devastating, and a disgusting abuse of power. Senseless beatings, a week before his 23rd birthday... my nephew was given a death sentence that neither a judge, nor state law approved.”

Again, my thanks for the opportunity to speak before you this afternoon.

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