



**Testimony by Stanley Bellamy, NYC Regional Organizer  
Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP Campaign)  
Before the Joint Assembly & Senate's Crime Victim, Crime and Correction  
Committees' Hearing  
On the Safety of Person in Custody, Transparency, and Accountability Within  
State Correctional Facilities**

**May 14, 2025**

Good morning to this esteemed body. I would like to begin by thanking Chair Salazar and Chair Dilan for convening this hearing and giving me this opportunity to speak. Thank you.

My name is Stanley Bellamy. I am the NYC Community Organizer for Release Aging People in Prison/RAPP Campaign. I am also a formerly incarcerated individual, who survived 37.5 years out of a 62.5 years to life sentence. Moreover, I am an impacted family member with an incarcerated brother who entered the prison system at the age of 20 and who turns 60 years old next month.

During my incarceration I earned two college degrees and served as president, chairperson, and executive director of countless inside organizations. Further, I either created or facilitated numerous programs that identified, examined and addressed anti-social attitudes, behaviors, and values. These programs helped incarcerated people come to terms with the harm, pain and suffering their crimes caused the victims, the victims' families, their own families and themselves. These programs are some of the most effective resocialization and therapeutic programs in DOCCS history, and, unlike DOCCS' own programming, those who participated in several of the programs I helped lead have a zero percent recidivism rate.

However, I am not here today to talk about myself. I want to briefly discuss the longstanding and ongoing culture of physical and sexual violence in the prison environment and, how we, as stakeholders, can best alleviate some of the problems we are faced with today.

In order to help address the safety concerns of the incarcerated and state employees, we must first identify what the problems are. In this way we are better able to make meaningful changes.

Thus, the number one problem for me, as someone who survived 37.5 years in this system, is the culture of prisons. Prison guards and security supervisors often bring their inherent biases of how people should be treated, particularly Black and Brown people—especially those convicted of crimes—into the workspace, and create a work environment that upholds and even enforces anti-Black and Brown attitudes and behaviors.

For instance, staff, whether civilian or correction officers, who just want to do their job and go home, and who treat incarcerated individuals fairly, or as fellow human beings, are labeled “inmate lovers.” They are told by a majority of their colleagues that they are: “Either with us, or against us!” If these employees continue the apparently offensive behavior of treating incarcerated individuals as human beings and not livestock, they are subjected to being bullied, threatened, having their tires slashed, and in some instances assaulted. Staff who blow the whistle about misconduct by their colleagues are subjected to far worse; their families are harassed to the point where they often must resign and leave town.

This attitude, or rite of passage into accepting and taking on dehumanizing attitudes and behavior are promoted from the Deputy Superintendent of Security to the Captains, Lieutenants and Sergeants who all began their careers as so-called Correction Officers.

Consequently, in just about every prison I entered in my 37.5 years, I encountered the same orientation: “Put your hands on the wall, lean back as far as you can go and spread your legs!” I was told if I moved or took my hands off of the wall, or did anything they perceived as threatening, even if it was only to finch at another man touching my body, I would be beaten within an inch of my life.

We witnessed how these attitudes and behaviors played out in real time as we watched the brutal murder of Robert Brooks. Thankfully, what was missing from that video was the sound of Robert Brooks’ screams. Screams and cries that I have heard far too often, along with the crack of batons breaking people’s bones and the racial epithets that guards frequently use when they are assaulting people.

Robert Brooks is far from the only person murdered by prison guards. Sadly, I cannot even describe such incidents as rare. For years and decades, officers have beaten and killed Black people in New York’s prisons – including Leonard Strickland, Samuel

Harrell, Karl Taylor, Terry Cooper, John McMillon, and countless others – and yet the racist system of brutality continues unabated.

As many as 20 officers were reported to have repeatedly kicked and punched Samuel Harrell while shouting racial slurs at him, before throwing Samuel down a staircase. Other officers were similarly reported to have punched, kicked, choked, and stomped John McMillon to death. Jurors awarded \$9.25 million to Terry Cooper's family, after officers reportedly beat him to death with a baton. The state settled a lawsuit with Karl Taylor's family for \$5 million after officers reportedly beat, jumped on, and choked him to death. Even after all the court settlements and thousands of complaints, the state did nothing to change the conditions that fostered this type of violence.

I was incarcerated at Sullivan when staff murdered Karl Taylor. Everyone in the prison, incarcerated people and staff alike, knew exactly what happened. Yet, the guards who killed Karl Taylor were allowed to retire and keep their pensions.

In addition to this type of violence, there is an epidemic of sexual violence against people of all genders in New York State prisons, particularly against women and femmes. In fact, under the Adult Survivors Act passed by this legislature, the party most frequently sued is the New York City jail system, followed by the New York State prison system.

Staff impunity, solitary confinement, searches and strip frisks, along with systemic deprivation of basic necessities all foster rampant physical and sexual abuse. Despite DOCCS' common refrain that it has "zero tolerance" for such behavior, those in authority are well-aware of the problem, but do little or nothing to stop it. Often, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) officers are among those engaging in abuse. Reporting abuse by staff is among the most dangerous actions a person in prison can take.

Sadly, there is actually no cure for the racist brutality and sexual violence of our state's prison system. Mass incarceration is the latest incarnation of the legacy of slavery. Some members of this legislative body are perfectly comfortable explicitly advocating for the continued reliance on the imprisonment of Black and brown bodies from across the state to fuel the local economies in their districts. These same legislators apparently lack the will or the imagination or both to deliver good *and* just employment opportunities for their constituents, and instead expect the racial caste system of our legal system to keep them afloat indefinitely. That ideology manifests in the attitudes and behaviors of prison staff, who view themselves as masters and owners of incarcerated people, and laws and policies exist only to be circumvented as they carry

out their own idea of what justice or punishment means. That said, there are critical steps the State can and must take this session, amid heightened attention to this crisis to reduce the harm and help save lives.

My recommendations for this esteemed body are:

1. The surest way to protect people from the racist brutality, sexual violence, and pervasive medical neglect of our state's prison system is to offer fair and meaningful pathways to release. That is why we urge the Legislature to pass the Elder Parole (S454/A514) and Fair & Timely Parole (S159/A127) bills – to reunite families, promote personal transformation and public safety, and end permanent punishment. Among other benefits, these bills will promote safety inside prisons by offering people a light at the end of the tunnel and a greater impetus to change their own behavior.
2. We also support the The Second Look Act (S.158/A.1283) and Earned Time Act (S.342/A.1085) bills for these same reasons, as well as the Marvin Mayfield Act (S.1209/A.1297) to end mandatory minimum sentences.
3. While these bills are critical and urgent, there already exists one underutilized pathway to release: Executive Clemency. We urge the Governor to use this power expansively, inclusively, and transparently to correct the injustices of mass incarceration and extreme sentences.
4. To help transform the culture inside prisons, it is critical to require that the prison system respect basic human rights. Following decades of rampant abuse and neglect, NYSDOCCS only aggravated the problem in recent years by banning care packages from loved ones, restricting contact visits, and – perhaps most appallingly – wantonly violated the HALT Solitary Confinement Law enacted by a supermajority of legislators and signed into law. For this reason, we urge the legislature to pass the Rights Behind Bars bill and we urge NYSDOCCS to fully implement the HALT Solitary Confinement Law.
5. To hold prison staff accountable and prevent abuse and other misconduct, the state needs an effective, independent oversight body led by people who have survived this system and those with loved ones inside. Unfortunately, the many layers of oversight that exist currently are not working. That includes DOCCS' internal Office of Special Investigations, the State Commission on Correction, and local, state and federal prosecutors. The power structure of our prison system, along with the culture of brutality and the blue wall of silence, render such oversight feckless and even dangerous. One important step is to pass the Ending Qualified Immunity (S176/A1402) bill.
6. In recognition of the reality that the racist brutality by staff in prisons also occurs in immigration detention facilities, we also support New York for All

(S.2235/A3506), Dignity Not Detention (S316/A4181), and Access to Representation Act (S141/A270).