

## ALLIANCE of FAMILIES for JUSTICE

### Written Testimony

Senate hearing convened September 22, 2020 by Senators Rivera and Sepulveda

#### Introduction by Danny Glover

Thank you for the opportunity to address you. I am honored to be a founding Board member and Chair of the Board of Directors of the Alliance of Families for Justice (“AFJ”). This organization means so much to me personally because it speaks to my own lived experience. The mission of AFJ is to support, empower and mobilize families with incarcerated loved ones and people with a criminal record.

In May of 2020, AFJ hosted a Town Hall during which family members spoke of the harsh realities presented by the COVID19 pandemic and the health risks their incarcerated loved ones faced. Their testimony was moving and haunting. It was haunting because the dangers were very real and those in authority had made it clear that they didn’t care.

As family members described the reality of their loved ones lives - lack of hand sanitizer, masks and liquid soap coupled with the complete inability to practice social distancing - they more than proved their point, No one in authority cared. For people incarcerated in New York’s prisons and jails, sickness and death in the face of the pandemic were a harsh reality.

As I listened to many of the AFJ family members they reminded me so much of my own mother and father as they endured the challenges of my brothers’ incarceration. I reflected on how distraught they would be today knowing that two of their grandsons are incarcerated under similar circumstances as those that exist here in New York. I ask you to listen to their truth and heed their cries. Thank you.

#### Our Reality; Our Concerns

As the families, friends and supporters of the thousands of men and women who are incarcerated in prisons throughout New York State we are united in our dismay over the inhumane changes implemented by New York’s Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (“DOCCS”) regarding visitation in prisons. These restrictions deepen the pain created by the COVID19 pandemic by limiting visiting hours, forbidding physical contact except brief embraces at the beginning and end of visits, limiting the

number of visitors, closing the children's play area, ceasing the processing of marriage license applications and shuttering the Family Reunion Program.

DOCCS is taking advantage of the situation in order to implement long-term punitive and harmful changes to visitation instead of making the safety, well-being, and mental health of our loved ones and us a priority. After shutting down visits for over five months where guards were required to wear masks until just recently (and they still refuse to wear them), these new rules, among other things have abolished the right for families to kiss, or touch each other and have denied our children a space to play. After traveling for hours to spend quality time with the people we love, we are expected to tolerate only seeing them for a few fleeting hours.

Just as the rest of the world is finding creative ways to keep everyone safe from COVID-19, DOCCS can also do so without using measures so harsh, restrictive, punitive, and unjust for families and our loved ones.

Our incarcerated loved ones are being issued disciplinary tickets for kissing us, their spouses, partners, parents and children; or for touching us. They are being quarantined without any indication that they have tested positive for COVID19 or been in any contact with someone who tested positive. They are being sanctioned with months of solitary confinement and we are being banned from visiting them for months. ALL of these measures are purely punitive. Strong family ties are one of the fundamental factors for rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society. Our collective humanity demands that visiting not be curtailed with draconian measures. DOCCS must reinstate the Family Reunion Program, resume processing marriage license applications and restore the previous visitation policy with meaningful ways to strengthen family ties in conjunction with more sensible safety measures that are not punitive.

#### The Voice of a Family Member: Karima S.

This breath-taking experience has been one I will never be able to forget. Numerous sleepless nights delivering images of my husband's face, overcome with worry and grief, hearing the sound of his voice repeatedly telling me how deeply he misses the comfort of my touch, the smell of my hair, and his ability to honor our union with the kiss of my ring, a ritual we perform at the start of every visit. The inability to embrace one another and provide comfort during a time when the state of the country was in an uproar so deep that it attacked the mental well-being and emotional states of many is simply inhumane. I have endured many heart breaks as a result of hearing stories of the deaths, attacks and insensitive actions all during this time, a time when my ability to physically

embrace my husband as a gesture of comfort was not an option. A smile, a kiss or even a gentle rub on the hand was again, not an option. Not being able to unite with my life long partner, best friend and confidant has been a struggle I wish was not my reality. My family and I have suffered as a result of not having physical contact with the one man who provides as much strength, guidance and support to us and we do him. His ability to maintain a direct presence in the lives of our children had been put on hold and irreparable damage is now something we have been left to endure. Thank you for giving me some of your precious time today as these words are my truth, my experience and one I wish to be a catalyst for change in the future protocols within the justice system for times like these. Thank you again.