



**New York State Senate Committees on Crime Victims,
Crime and Correction and Ethics and Internal Governance:
*“The Impact of Sexual Assault in the Prison System”***

**COBA 3rd VICE PRESIDENT KEISHA WILLIAMS
TESTIMONY**

**Hon. Julia Salazar
Chairwoman**

**Hon. Alessandra Biaggi
Chairwoman**

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NEW YORK STATE SENATE

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Salazar, Chairwoman Biaggi, and the members of your committees. My name is Keisha Williams and I am the 3rd Vice President of the Correction Officers' Benevolent Association, the second-largest law enforcement union in the City of New York. Our members, as you know, provide care, custody, and control of approximately 5,600 inmates daily. Our members also comprise the most diverse uniformed force in New York City and approximately 50% of our members are female.

Today's hearing focuses on the impact of sexual assault in the prison and jail system. With the limited time I have, it is important for your committees and the public to understand how deep the pervasive culture of sexual assault and sexual harassment is in New York City's jail system.

But before I begin, I want you to know that the topic of sexual assault is not foreign to me. As a Correction Officer assigned to the Eric Taylor Center on Rikers Island in 2016, I was performing my duties when an inmate suddenly assaulted me by forcibly touching my breasts. Immediately, I felt sick to my stomach. I felt violated. I felt ashamed. I felt like I was in a total state of shock. How could this happen? Why did this happen?

In the weeks and months that followed, I experienced nightmares, anxiety, guilt, and other forms of PTSD. My assailant was given a slap

on the wrist and even discharged the very next day while never being fully charged with an actual sexual assault. While I, on the other hand, have been forced to carry the burden of that trauma every single day for the rest of my life.

My story is one of many, many stories of sexual assault and sexual harassment that have become all too common and all too familiar day after day, week, after week, month after month, year after year in our city's jails. On any given day, our officers are forced to confront everything from disgusting verbal sexual harassment to lewd gestures, to inmates literally masturbating in front of them and throwing semen on them to violent sexual assaults, including even attempted rape. This, Senators, is the hostile work environment our officers face daily.

For decades, the Department of Correction turned a blind eye on these injustices. In fact, until last year, the DOC didn't even track incidents of sexual assaults against Correction Officers. The combination of failing to report, track, and punish sexual offenders only embolden sexual predators to continue to assault us with impunity.

As soon as I was elected to a leadership position on the COBA Executive Board in 2020, I teamed up with my fellow Board Members Ashaki Antoine, COBA's 1st City Wide Trustee and Antoinette Anderson, COBA's Corresponding Secretary, to finally rip the lid off the culture of sexual assault and sexual harassment in our jails. After

months of meetings with local and state legislators, as well as stories placed in TV, print and radio news outlets, we have shined a spotlight on this problem and encouraged more victims to come forward.

Since January 2021, twenty-two Correction Officers have been sexually assaulted by inmates and less than half of those assailants have been indicted for their crimes. This doesn't even include the hundreds of incidents of sexual harassment and indecent exposure that occur daily.

It's time to send a message to these sexual predators that their time is up! Accordingly, COBA, with the support of Senator Diane Savino, Senator Stavisky and Assemblyman David Weprin has introduced legislation that would for the first time, make the forcible touching of a New York City Correction Officer a Felony instead of a Misdemeanor. Bill Number S8027 can potentially be game changer in our war against sexual assaults and sexual harassment in our jails.

But we cannot win this war without your support Senator Biaggi and Senator Salazar and your fellow legislators. Every legislator who stood strong during the Me-Too movement against the rampant sexual harassment and assaults in every aspect of our society must now stand with our officers and continue that same advocacy by voting for S8027 and ensuring it gets signed into law. The failure to enact this much needed legislation would also fail to protect the rights of our brave, essential correction officers who signed up to keep New Yorkers safe,

but did not sign up to be sexually assaulted and harassed in their noble service to their city. History will judge you on your vote regarding this legislation. And years from now, future generations will look at New York as either the state that continued to support the status quo, perpetuating the culture of sexual assault and sexual harassment in our jails or the state that took a bold stand and stood with New York's Boldest to stand up to sexual predators and collectively say, **YOUR TIME IS UP!**

With that said, I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.