

Statement for the 1/20/17 Prison Reform Rally

By Askari Danso, Augusta Correctional Center

Our goal for the rally today is to communicate to Law Makers, right here where you are standing, to "Reform" the Virginia prison system. This means that we have to explore the question of what exactly do we want Reformed? Do we want the state to stop using a Billion Dollars of taxpayer money to Mass incarcerate people? Does it mean we want the state to End Racial Disparity in Conviction, Sentencing, and length of stay in prison? Does it mean we want to end Truth In Sentencing polices that actually hide the Truth about the Expensive, Unfair, and Excessive system that it's created? How about the fact that visitation policies are dehumanizing for both the prisoner & the Visitor? What about the mail policy and the cruelty imposed on both the receiver and the sender when the Pictures, Cards, and Letters are photo copied? Is this the prison reform that we're asking for? Or how about asking that Prisons stop being closed down in the Eastern Region where Blacks work and where most of us prisoners are from; while new prisons are then opened in the Western Region where whites work and that are too far away for our families to visit?

There's a lot to be Reformed in this State Prison system because we have allowed those who benefit from this system to continue to "Stack the Deck" against us. Private companies like Global Tel Link, JPay, and Keefe have sucked money from prisoners families who in most case are struggling to make ends meet. Yet these companies know that the love you have for your incarcerated loved one will cause you to give your last dime to ease their hardship. Meanwhile, the Virginia Department of Corrections produces prison environments that are so "Depressing" that prisoners will do damn near anything to cope- even turn to drugs!!! At the same time this is happening prisoners are also working their ass off to keep the prisons open and help the state produce profits for pennies on the Dollar. Yet, when we attempt to organize around our labor in any way they call it a "Group Demonstration," put us in solitary confinement, then transfer us to one of their 5 Maximum Security Prisons or their Supermax Prison! All of which costs over 100 million Dollars to build and 10 million dollars a year to keep open- and they don't need them! So what the Law Makers are telling us when they do these things is that they will expand the prison system but won't expand medicaid. The State will produce state of the art prisons while Richmond & Tidewater schools crumble, and Amelia County schools close on Fridays due to lack of funding. Why does Virginia need 45 prisons? Why does Virginia need 66 Jails? Why Does Virginia spend one (1) Billion Dollars a year to Mass Incarcerate people? They don't need to do it! I have been in the system for 20 years. I was arrested when I was 18 years old and now I'm 38 years old. I can tell all of you that I am Definitely "Not" a threat to your Safety! I'm Reformed!

They can let me go! But they won't let me Go! In fact, I'm not scheduled to be let go until 2044. That's 26 more years at \$27,000 a year keeping me locked up- For What? I'm not a threat to Public Safety. The 18 years old version of me

died a long time ago. I'm almost 40 years old. And yet they won't let me out until I'm 60 when I actually "will" be a burden on the Public because I won't have any Property, I won't have any money, I won't be employable, and I may not have any family to go home to. So who's really benefiting from this system? Because obviously the system is broken for some and not broken for others? Why else would they fight so hard to keep it open? This is why we are out here today- You in body and we in spirit. We are here to say enough is enough and to begin to do the work of changing this broken system. Which is where we must go from here. We must begin to organize and network with one another in many different ways. We need family support groups, call teams to hold prison Wardens accountable to the injustices perpetrated on prisoners by their staff, fundraising committees to help with legal costs for complaints filed by prisoners to protect Prisoners Rights; to help Hispanic brothers & sisters communicate with their families; to help incarcerated parents gets more access to their children. We need to demand that state and local officials change laws and policies that are abusive and expensive.

Most importantly they need to know that criminal justice reform means ENDING MASS INCARCERATION! Virginia is a New Jim Crow state that punishes blacks harsher and so Truth in Sentencing has a disproportionate impact on minority communities. We must demand that these law makers reinstate parole so that those who deserve a chance to go back to their communities can get there. We also must let Ralph Northam and the Democratic Party know that we are disappointed with the fact that nearly 70% of those in Virginia's Prison system were sentenced outside of there sentencing guidelines yet the Governor only pardoned 6 due to, quote, "extensive" sentencing??? What about the other 25,000 of us who were given extensive sentences? Do we deserve justice? So we have to organize. We also have to network. We must Share contact information with one another (Facebook pages, websites, twitter pages, Instagram pages, email addresses, and phone numbers) and reach out to one another because we can't do anything alone. But if we come together we can take down this miserable system. WE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT OUR CHAINS! Thank You!

