

Testimony

By Valerie Bell, mother of Sean Bell

**Submitted to New York State Senate Committee on Codes
In Support of S.3695-Bailey/A. 2513-O'Donnell, Repealing NYS CRL Section 50-a**

My name is Valerie Bell. I'm the mother of Sean Bell, who was killed in a hail of 50 bullets on Nov. 25, 2016, on the morning of his wedding.

I'm here today to say very clearly to our New York State Senators that 50-a must be repealed. This police secrecy law is used time and time again to shield abusive officers and when there is no transparency and accountability, police killings and brutality continue. No one knows the devastating impact of this better than we families who have lost loved ones to the police.

13 years ago, my son was killed by five officers from a NYPD "Club Enforcement Initiative" in Jamaica, Queens. They boxed my son's car in and shot at him and his friends 50 times. They said they thought my son had a gun, but he and his friends were unarmed.

It's been over a decade, but I remember all too well the trauma that his murder put me and my family through. Part of what was so terrible was not being able to get our questions about what happened to Sean and who his killers were answered.

We couldn't get any information from the NYPD or the Queens District Attorney's Office. I knew my son had been at his bachelor's party and was leaving a club in his car with his friends when officers opened fire, but I didn't get any details about who these officers were or the fact that they were not even supposed to be at that club until I sat through the criminal trial two years later. I didn't even know there was a fifth officer involved in my son's murder until it came out in the paper five years later.

Not being able to get answers was like losing Sean over and over again. You cannot imagine the pain this causes parents and family members, unless you go through it.

That's why I'm here today and why I have been fighting to repeal 50-a. People of color continue to be killed by the police and I understand what it's like for their families to have to fight tooth and nail for transparency. Today, because 50-a has been expanded through politics and case law, families cannot get even the most basic details about the officers who have killed their loved ones, like their names and if they are still patrolling our streets. Police departments are ready to leak information about our children and loved ones to try to criminalize them and blame them for their own deaths, but we families cannot get basic information.

As you'll hear, 50-a was used to try to withhold information from Ramarley Graham and Eric Garner's families. Victoria Davis may never know the outcome of the CCRB investigation of Officer Wayne Isaacs, who murdered her brother, Delrawn Small.

These are just a few examples. 50-a is a wall that every new family will run up against, when trying to uncover the truth about their loved ones' deaths.

Families who lose loved ones to the police deserve to know the truth. Across the state, the names and misconduct records of officers who kill and abuse New Yorkers, what discipline these officers receive,

are all hidden from survivors, families and communities. The public needs this information. This is about public safety. Hiding this information means that officers who are repeat offenders are allowed to keep their jobs, business as usual, and the violence continues.

It's been 13 years since Sean's death and, every year, we meet new families and go to more funerals. Each and every one of these families wants and deserves transparency and the truth about what happened to their loved ones. The public deserves transparency. We are at risk without it.

In 2015, I was one of 12 family members of New Yorkers killed by the police who came together to force Governor Cuomo to sign a special prosecutor executive order. We were able to do this because we understand firsthand what change is needed and because we are unified. For the families, repealing 50-a, as well as strengthening and expanding that special prosecutor by making it law, is a top priority. It is a matter of life and death and it need to get done. We, the families, want you to understand that we're coming together to make sure it happens in the 2020 session.