

Testimony of Christine Henson, Justice Committee Member

Delivered to the New York City Council for February 6, 2023 Joint Hearing of Committee on Hospitals, the Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction, the Committee on Fire and Emergency Management and the Committee on Public Safety

My name is Christine Henson. I am the mother of Andrew Henson, who has autism and limited speech abilities. When he was 16, Andrew was assaulted by NYPD officers. Since then, I have been afraid for Andrew's life. A lot of what I've heard today is making that fear even worse.

I'm here to oppose the mayor's dangerous involuntary hospitalization directive and intro 273. The NYPD should be completely removed from responding to people with mental illness and from responding to people with autism.

In 2018, I was at a meeting with Andrew's principal. I requested that Andrew get a speech evaluation at BronxCare and she arranged for it to happen on the same day. The school called an ambulance to transport us to BronxCare. Almost two dozen officers from two precincts came.

When we got out of the ambulance, Andrew told me he wanted something to eat. I was going to take him to get food but the EMT grabbed Andrew. Within seconds officers rushed over and piled on top of him.

I saw Andrew's body go limp while five officers held his arms behind his back. They twisted his neck and forced his knees and his face onto a bench. They ignored my screams that he has special needs.

My son needed care that was gentle and voluntary. Instead, he was force against his will and criminalized. He has been mistreated by the NYPD multiple times since and every time he is re-traumatized.

Since 2018, my son has regressed. He's 20 now and I need to buy him diapers. His IQ has decreased from 16 to 9. NYPD excessive physical force altered his life. My live my life around keeping him alive.

With the mayor's directive, Andrew is in even more danger. Cops already scare him. If he gets frightened around them, are they just going to sweep him up and take him away?

There is no amount of training that will prepare NYPD officers to respond to people like my son. The purpose of the NYPD is to arrest and criminalize people, not care for them. Intro 273 may be well intentioned, but it will only teach officers how to better criminalize and manipulate people with autism.

If we keep sending armed officers to deal with people in distress or who need medical assistance, we will keep getting violence. We need an end to the mayor's directive. Intro 273 must be opposed. We need to completely remove the NYPD from responding to those who are struggling with mental illness or disabilities, and we need to get them out of our schools.
