

Testimony of
Eric Vassell, Father of Saheed Vassell, killed by NYPD officers on April 4, 2018
Submitted to the New York City Council
Public Safety Committee Hearing at New York City Hall
February 7, 2019

Good afternoon Chairman Richards and members of the Public Safety Committee.

Thank you to Speaker Johnson for the invitation to speak at today's hearing and to Chairman Richards for including me in this hearing. My name is Eric Vassell and I'm the father of Saheed Vassell. Saheed was 34 years old on April 4, 2018, when he was murdered by NYPD officers near our family's home in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

To say that Saheed's death has been difficult for our family and community is an understatement. He was a bright light for my wife, children and our extended family abroad. In death, I got to know my son even better through our neighbors, many of whom poured into our home to share their stories of his giving nature. I'm sad to say I didn't know about all the people he helped do laundry, carry grocery bags or accompanied to the train station in the wee morning hours until after he died.

I share this with you because I'm not sure what you know about my son beyond the destructive and false narrative the NYPD put out about Saheed only hours after they killed him. Saheed was killed at about 4:40pm after SRG and anti-crime officers pulled up on a busy intersection and recklessly shot at him 10 times in less than 30 seconds. One bullet entered a nearby store. Many children were in the area, traveling home from school. The police killed my son and endangered dozens more, but their first impulse was to release selectively edited

surveillance video of Saheed carrying a pipe, to justify the killing of another unarmed Black man. The NYPD used public resources to create propaganda, vilify my son and try to protect their officers — even before they would publicly name the officers and before any thorough investigation.

What I've come to know in the 10 months since Saheed's death is that the NYPD is far less concerned with the safety of my community and holding itself accountable than it is with making its actions appear justified to the general public. Councilmembers: you represent the voice of the people on public safety and I am asking you to hold the NYPD accountable for disciplining those who make communities less safe for the public.

In the weeks after he died, police officers harassed our neighbors, who were understandably distressed. Since the NYPD didn't publicly release the names of the officers who killed Saheed, many people feared they were being harassed by the same officers. It took more than 16 weeks of organizing and public pressure to force the de Blasio administration and NYPD to finally name the four officers who shot at my son, but we still don't have the names of all officers and supervisors who were on the scene. This is wrong and dangerous.

My family demanded that the NYPD release the names of the four officers who killed Saheed. While the NYPD often cites potential retaliation as a reason for not releasing the names of officers involved in civilian shootings, our concern was that our son's killers were hiding in plain sight, free to cause more harm to more families and communities.

The NYPD never officially released a statement with the names of those who killed

Saheed. To this day, over 10 months after my son was murdered in broad daylight, as these officers are being investigated by the State Attorney General, none of them have even been put on modified duty. This decision the NYPD made to keep the officers fully armed on the same streets where they erroneously killed my son is deeply discouraging to my family and alarming to the Crown Heights community. And the fact that the Attorney General's office has not yet moved to indict the officers — after 10 months — makes me and my family concerned that elected officials are all trying to sweep Saheed's murder under the rug.

While putting an officer on modified duty is not a formal disciplinary action, taking it shows concern for public safety while an investigation is underway. It sends a message to a community that their lives are valuable and that there is a chance of a fair investigation. It also shows the most basic level of respect for a life taken by the people whose job it was to protect it.

The NYPD's choice not to put Leon Dinham, Anthony Bottiglieri and Bekim Molic of the 71st Precinct, and Omar Rafiq of the SRG on modified duty sends the message that they have no regard for my son's life. If they cannot take a pre-disciplinary action that protects New Yorkers, we have no hope they will discipline these officers or any of the others involved unless they are forced to.

I came here today to tell my family's story. I mentioned it is an understatement to say that Saheed's death has been difficult for our family and community. I hope you understand what I mean. Of course the death of a loved one, a young man and my son at that, is already difficult. My son was killed by New York City employees and our family has been discouraged by the lack of accountability for those employees' actions. Dealing with Saheed's death is

made more difficult every time it is brushed off as a mistake by the Commissioner or the Mayor. When my family thinks of the people who killed Saheed holstering their guns every day when they go into work, it makes our grief that much heavier to bear. To know that these officers could harm us or one of our neighbors is a fear we carry every time we leave our homes.

I am asking this committee for the answers we have not been able to get from the NYPD. Why are officers not immediately put on modified duty after a civilian shooting? Why are the names of officers involved in such shootings not immediately released, as was the case under Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg? And what hope can families like ours have that officers will be disciplined for killing their loved ones? I am also asking for your assistance in demanding that the NYPD put the officers who murdered my son on immediate modified leave, make their investigation public and transparent, and bring disciplinary charges against the officers who unjustly killed my son.

Thank you.