

Coalition Demands Governor Northam Grant a Full Pardon of Neli Latson, A Young Black Man with Disabilities Subjected to a Decade of Injustice

WASHINGTON – Neli Latson should be a free man. Instead, he’s faced a decade of unjust prosecution and abuse in a criminal justice system where, as a young Black man with disabilities, he’s experienced the disastrous combination of systemic racism and ableism. As the nation faces a critical turning point in the fight against systemic racism and racial injustice -- including the compounding injustices facing Black people with disabilities -- it is time to #FreeNeli.

In a new [letter](#) to Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, a coalition of nearly 50 advocacy groups and legislators led by The Arc of the United States, The Arc of Virginia, the Center for Public Representation, and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network are calling on the Governor to right this wrong by immediately granting Mr. Latson a full pardon, committing to continue funding his disability services in Florida where he and his family now reside, and issue a public apology to Mr. Latson and his family.

In 2010, Mr. Latson was an 18-year-old special education student, sitting outside of a library in Stafford County, Virginia, waiting for it to open. Someone called the police reporting a “suspicious” Black male, possibly with a gun. Mr. Latson had committed no crime and was not armed. The resulting confrontation with a deputy was the beginning of years of horrific abuse in the criminal justice system. The prosecutors refused to consider Mr. Latson’s disabilities and rejected an offer of disability services as an alternative to incarceration. Instead, he was punished in the criminal justice system with long periods of solitary confinement, Taser shocks, and the use of a full-body restraint chair for hours on end for behaviors related to his disabilities. At one point, Mr. Latson was even locked up in a small jail cell with no sink or toilet for days.

Virginia and national disability advocates urged then-Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe to grant a pardon to Mr. Latson. In 2015, Governor McAuliffe granted him a conditional pardon, requiring him to live in a restrictive residential setting and be subjected to on-going supervision by the criminal justice system. The terms of his 2015 conditional pardon mean that he could be sent back to jail at any time, causing Mr. Latson to experience constant anxiety.

“The time for Virginia to rectify its egregious wrongs in the case of Neli Latson is long past due and must happen now. Mr. Latson has suffered his entire adult life and received discriminatory and cruel treatment in the criminal justice system – because of behaviors connected to his disabilities and the color of his skin. Governor Northam, please issue a full pardon immediately,” said Peter Berns, CEO, The Arc.

“Mr. Latson's life was stolen from him when he was barely an adult. He must now receive the justice he deserves following a decade of mistreatment, with his young adult life lost to pain and anguish. A full pardon and continued support services are the only ways to correct the wrong done to him,” said Tonya Milling, Executive Director of The Arc of Virginia.

“Mr. Latson’s case is a tragic example of how disability is too often criminalized, especially for Black people with disabilities,” said Alison Barkoff, Director of Advocacy at the Center for Public Representation. “Virginia must begin to address the systemic racism and ableism in its criminal justice system. We call on Governor Northam to take an important first step by granting a full pardon to Mr. Latson.”

"Despite years of advocacy, Neli's freedom is still unnecessarily curtailed by his placement in a restrictive residential setting and ongoing supervision by the criminal system,” said Samantha Crane, Legal Director of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network. “He lacks the freedom to choose his daily activities, find a job, and pursue relationships on his own terms. It's time for Virginia to provide Neli the supports he needs to live a more self-directed life integrated into the community where he now lives."

Advocates have fought tirelessly for justice for Mr. Latson for nearly a decade and will keep fighting until we #FreeNeli.

For more information on today’s letter, contact:

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