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The Honorable Linda Greenstein
Chair of Senate Law and Public Safety Committee
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TESTIMONY FROM THE NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN OPPOSITION OF S2562/A4263

Good Morning Chair Greenstein, Vice Chair Cryan, and members of this Committee.

My name is Yannick Wood. I am the Director of Criminal Justice Reform at the New Jersey Institute of Social Justice. Our Institute’s advocacy empowers people of color by building reparative systems that create wealth, transform justice and harness democratic power—from the ground up—in New Jersey.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to S2562/A4263 which legitimizes the police use of chokeholds as deadly force and to voice my support instead for George Floyd’s Law, S2617, which is a complete ban and criminalization of police chokeholds.

Last night, I had a difficult conversation with Gwen Carr, who is the mother of Eric Garner who was killed after being strangled by a police officer. It was heartbreaking telling her that despite her son’s tragedy, New Jersey’s legislature was choosing to legitimize rather than ban police chokeholds. And now as we approach the anniversary of George Floyd’s murder, we cannot forget the horror of witnessing yet another black man being strangled to death by a police officer. Chokeholds are tortuous and deadly and have no place in a just and humane society. New York State’s legislature agreed and passed the Eric Garner bill that bans and criminalizes chokeholds. New Jersey must do the same. We must ban chokeholds and not categorize them.

Chokeholds are ineffective. When an officer applies a chokehold, the other party will struggle to breathe, and that struggle will cause the officer to
continue to choke them creating a cycle of escalation which may result in serious injury or death.

And, chokeholds are unnecessary. Officers already have tactics to subdue individuals during arrests. They can deescalate. They can coordinate a response. They can request backup. They can do what they should be trained to do to ensure that everyone walks out of the situation alive. I encourage all of you to read the Office of the Public Defender’s written testimony which highlights that most of the nation’s largest police departments have banned or restricted chokeholds.

Given these reasons, why then would we act to legitimize the very practice that we should condemn? A vote to support this bill is a vote to support the use of chokeholds as a law enforcement tactic. A vote to support this bill makes it the official policy of our state that it is acceptable to use chokeholds. A vote to support this bill means that George Floyd may soon be joined by others who will die at the hands of this brutal police tactic.

We refuse to believe that is what the Legislature wants. Please vote against this measure. Instead, please create meaningful police accountability by supporting the George Floyd Bill, S2617, which bans and criminalizes chokeholds.

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