



WASHINGTON BUREAU · NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE
1156 15TH STREET, NW SUITE 915 · WASHINGTON, DC 20005 · P (202) 463-2940 · F (202) 463-2953
E-MAIL: WASHINGTONBUREAU@NAACPNET.ORG · WEB ADDRESS WWW.NAACP.ORG

**STATEMENT OF MS. ADORA OBI NWEZE
PRESIDENT
FLORIDA STATE CONFERENCE OF NAACP BRANCHES
BEFORE THE HOUSE JUDICIARY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM AND HOMELAND SECURITY
HEARING ON OVERSIGHT OF STATE-RUN JUVENILE CORRECTIONAL
FACILITIES KNOWN AS “BOOT CAMPS”**

December 13, 2007

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, and distinguished guests. My name is Adora Obi Nweze and it is my honor to be here today in my capacity as President of the Florida State Conference, NAACP. With more than 50 NAACP units in the state of Florida, we are proud to represent and pursue the civil rights interests of all Floridians of color throughout the state.

In addition to serving as President of the Florida State Conference since 2000, I am currently on the NAACP National Board of Directors and have served as a Branch President in Miami and Opa-Locka for 13 years.

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, I was born and reared in the Miami area and I am a Florida girl from the heart. And I must tell you that in all my years of community activism in Miami and throughout the state that the mistreatment of African American youth by the State of Florida is perhaps the one issue that has raised the most concern, the most anxiety, and the most outrage among African Americans throughout the state.

Black Floridians are outraged that the State continues to neglect, harm and even kill our youth and appear to get away with it.

I am therefore here today to ask you to use your oversight powers to urge the United States Department of Justice (DoJ) to launch a thorough investigation of the State of Florida's Juvenile Justice system. It is incumbent upon the federal government to ensure that the rights of Florida's children are being protected, and from our viewpoint it does not appear that they are.

According to the latest data, more than 42% of the children who were involved in the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) in fiscal year 2006 were African Americans, and more than 55% were racial or ethnic minorities¹. This disparate amount means that the NAACP, and all Floridians concerned about the civil rights of our children, is disproportionately concerned about how our youngest citizens are treated by the Florida DJJ.

Every day, it seems, a Florida NAACP unit receives a new complaint about a child in Florida's Juvenile Justice system who is being abused, harmed or neglected. Perhaps the best known case of the mistreatment of our youth in recent years is the case of Martin Lee Anderson, in 2006. Martin was a 14-year-old African American boy who lived in Panama City, FL. and had some minor infractions with the law. His subsequent detainment by the Florida DJJ resulted in his death. Despite the outcry that occurred as a result of Martin's death and the mishandling of the case from the beginning by the State of Florida, and the fact that the boot camps have been closed, the problems within the system still exist.

On January 5, 2006, within the first two hours of his first day at the Bay County Boot Camp, camp officials forced him to continue exercising after he stopped to catch his breath. Drill instructors grabbed Martin and applied numerous uses of force, including holding him by the arms, throwing him to the ground, sitting on his chest and covering his mouth while forcing him to inhale ammonia. Frankly, these moves are much more consistent with the interrogation techniques being used in Iraq and Afghanistan and currently under debate in Congress than the acceptable treatment of an errant youth in the United States of America. Martin became unresponsive during this episode, and eventually died the next day.

At first, the official state autopsy determined Martin had died as a result of complications from sickle cell anemia. However, a second autopsy done at the request of Martin's family and in conjunction with the NAACP found that Martin had died of suffocation due to the actions of the guards.

What makes Martin's case unique is not that he dies at the hands of state officials while in their custody, but that his death was videotaped, which enabled the entire world to witness the beating, torture and eventual killing of a 14-year old boy. For your information, the video can be seen at the NAACP website, at www.naacp.org.

I would like to say at this point that the US DoJ, through Mr. Thomas L. Battles, the Regional Director of the DoJ 's Community Relations Service, has provided the NAACP with invaluable assistance throughout the Martin Lee Anderson case. Specifically, Mr. Battles and his office provided vital technical assistance to us through marches, protests, and town meetings.

¹ "A Profile of Florida Delinquency FY 2002/2003 – 2006/2007." Florida Department of Juvenile Justice Office of Research & Planning

Finally, on November 28, 2006, more than 10 months after Martin Lee Anderson was killed, seven guards and a nurse were arrested and charged with aggravated manslaughter of a child. After a two-week trial, even with the horrific video detailing the abuse and torture, all eight were found not guilty.

If there has been any justice in the death of Martin Lee Anderson, it has come from the Florida legislature. In April 2006 the Legislature passed the "*Martin Lee Anderson Act*" closing the state's five juvenile boot camps. The legislation was signed into law by then-Governor Jeb Bush on June 1, 2006.

I would hasten to say, however, that this legislation only affected the state-run juvenile boot camps. What we must understand is that privately run, state-contracted juvenile boot camps are still operating in the state of Florida.

This was too late for Martin, as well as for Willie Durden, who died at age 18 at the Cyprus Creek Juvenile Correction Center; Omar Paisley, who died at age 17 at the Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center; Daniel Matthews, who died at age 17 at Pinellas Regional Juvenile Detention Center; Brian Farmer, who died at age 17 at the Okeechobee Officer Correctional Center; Shawn Smith, who died at age 13 at the Volusia Regional Detention Center; and Michael Willtise, who died at age 12 at Camp E-Kel-ETU in Marion, Florida. All of these young men, these children, died between 2000 and 2006 while in the custodial care of the state of Florida.

It is important to me that we state the name of each of these young people for the record, as their deaths are quickly becoming forgotten, just like them. The Juvenile Justice System in Florida has the unfortunate habit of dehumanizing the children who are sent there, just when they need to be shown care, love and attention and taught that they are worth something.

And so I thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, and the others here who have worked so hard to try to make sense of Martin's death as well as the deaths of these other children.

As the President of the Florida NAACP, as well as an educator, a mother and a grandmother, I am committed to working with you to ensure that every American youth, regardless of their race, is given a decent chance. Thank you, again; I would happily take your questions.