

February 25, 2026

## **Statement on the Death of Nurul Shah Alam**

The death of Nurul Shah Alam is devastating.

Yes, there should be a full and transparent investigation. But if all we demand is an investigation, we will miss the deeper failure.

This was not a single bad decision by a single person.

It was a chain of “not my responsibility.”

A nearly blind man who spoke no English was arrested because he could not comply with commands he could not see or understand. He spent a year in jail. He was handed from one agency to another. And when he was finally released, he was dropped near an outdated address with no confirmed plan, no verified family contact, and no safe handoff.

At every step, his vulnerability was treated as incidental.

I worked in Black Rock. I have seen newly arrived families living without furniture, without winter coats, without basic adaptive supports — and watched schools and neighbors step in to fill gaps that formal systems overlooked.

It is telling that Mr. Shah Alam used a curtain rod as a walking stick.

Not because it was a weapon. Not because it was suspicious.

But because he did not have access to a white cane.

We often imagine disability in clean, recognizable symbols — a standard cane, a visible mobility device, something that signals clearly to authorities what they are looking at. But disability in real life is shaped by poverty, language barriers, trauma, and resettlement. It is often improvised.

When disability does not match what institutions expect it to look like, it is treated as defiance.

We need to ask a harder question than who is to blame. We need to ask what conditions made this outcome possible.

Because this outcome was possible long before that night.

It was possible because our systems assume capacity instead of verifying it.

Because disability is treated as an exception rather than a design requirement.

Because inter-agency handoffs prioritize liability over safety.

Because once custody ends, accountability evaporates.

An investigation may determine whether policies were technically followed. But if those policies do not require disability and language screening before release, do not require verified safe transport, do not require direct family notification, and do not require meaningful cross-agency communication, then the system will reproduce this outcome again.

Individual accountability matters. But it is not sufficient.

If a missing persons case can be closed based on assumption, and no structural review follows, that reflects institutional tolerance for risk when the person at risk is poor, disabled, and an immigrant.

If an agency can state that someone showed “no signs of distress” without recognizing near-blindness and language isolation as inherent vulnerabilities, that reveals a system that does not know how to recognize disability unless it is obvious, standardized, and convenient.

If we are serious about preventing this from happening again, repair must mean redesign.

That includes:

- Required disability and language screening prior to release from any custody setting.
- Verified safe handoff procedures, including direct contact with family, counsel, or a confirmed support person.
- Clear inter-agency transfer protocols that default to vulnerability assessment rather than assumption.
- Missing persons policies that presume heightened risk when disability or language barriers are present.

This was not simply a tragic mistake.

It was a system functioning exactly as it was built — to process, to transfer, to discharge — but not to protect.

Nurul Shah Alam survived persecution abroad. He survived resettlement. He survived incarceration.

**He did not survive institutional indifference.**

If we truly want accountability, it cannot end with a report. It must end with structural change.