

# Protesters demand reforms, justice for Brooks

**Casey Pritchard**

Utica Observer Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

Through the biting wind and cold, people gathered near Marcy Correctional on Tuesday with a fire in their hearts to protest and demand justice for Robert Brooks.

The group consisted of people from the Unified Black Caucus, Live and Direct on the Air, Freedom is a Must, Voice of Da Voiceless, and more.

Robert Brooks died on Dec. 10 at Wynn Hospital, following what officials said was “an altercation with a corrections officer,” that later was shown on bodycam footage to be a brutal assault of Brooks while his hands were cuffed behind his back.

“I’m here because I’ve been Robert Brooks,” said Avi Gross, host of the podcast “Live and Direct on the Air,” and a Freedom is a Must foundation member. “I made it out safely. Brooks did not.”

Gross identified himself as having once been incarcerated and now turned prison advocate.

“I go state to state and fight for justice against things like this: police brutality and harassment,” he said.

Gross said that too much time had passed and wanted to know why the 18 corrections facility employees were “...still free.”

“If it were us, they would have called local and state police, the sheriff, and Homeland Security to arrest us,” Gross said. “They’ve lost their jobs, but they need to be held accountable. It’s all on video.”

Robert Lucas, president of Voice of Da Voiceless, a not-for-profit organization focused on prison advocacy, called for accountability and shamed anyone who ignores the Brooks case.

Lucas said he lives in Utica and was once incarcerated for five and a half years, and since then, he refers to his time incarcerated as his “trauma and tribulations.”

He was released on June 13 from the Mohawk Correctional Facility.

And echoing Gross’s sentiment, Lucas said his experience was just like Brooks’.

“It wasn’t my time and tribulations; it was my trauma and tribulations,” he explained. “It’s trauma the minute you’re sentenced... It degraded who I was in society and that carries with you for the rest of your life. No matter where you go, you don’t feel like a normal



**Demanding justice and change, Unified Black Caucus, along with Live and Direct On the Air (Freedom is a Must), held a rally for Robert Brooks.** PHOTOS BY DANIEL DELOACH/UTICA OBSERVER-DISPATCH

human being.”

## Prison advocacy

More than anything, Lucas said that there needs to be a change in how the system handles incarcerated individuals and that, in many ways, people are left destroyed and are never the same.

“This is why we’re here. And we’re not going anywhere until this problem [with corrections] is resolved,” Lucas said. “We need to make sure this isn’t repeated, and this never happens again... If we want to correct individuals that have made a mistake, we need to put them somewhere that nurtures them, teaches them, molds them, and loves them.”

“Right now, you are putting someone in jail and then punishing them for being in jail,” he continued. “There has to be a sense of law, order, and balance. Without it, we have chaos.”



**Robert Lucas, president of Voice of Da Voiceless, outside of Marcy Correctional Facility on Tuesday.**