FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Autism Society, Tidewater Virginia works to create a community that is inclusive of all individuals through advocacy, education, resources, and support, regardless of race, neurodivergence, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or any other dimension of humanity.

The Autism Society, Tidewater Virginia believes that Matthew Rushin, a 21 year old autistic college student, was harshly sentenced despite his multiple diagnoses. Matthew was involved in a hit and run incident, and was physically wounded and in distress when officers arrived on scene; based on reports, no attempt was made to seek the medical or mental health supports he needed, and interrogations continued without his full comprehension of the allegations and situation at hand. Matthew was sentenced to 50 years with 40 years suspended for hit and run and malicious wounding, a devastating reality for him and his family. Matthew was a mechanical engineering student at Old Dominion University, and an active member of his community; his dreams are dashed while he suffers physical and mental deterioration in jail. Individuals with Autism are seven times more likely to interact with police, a frightening statistic for so many families. As a black, autistic, young man, Matthew’s negative interaction with police comes at a time when marginalized communities must work together against these injustices.

The Autism Society, Tidewater Virginia urges all Hampton Roads police departments to seek a complete and comprehensive Autism training program to recognize autistic traits, and create safer interactions with the Autism community. While some police departments in our region have begun implementing programs for children on the Autism Spectrum, there is a deep need for programs that help adults with Autism to learn to interact with law enforcement representatives.

Grassroots advocacy works best when communities come together in all shapes and numbers; we ask our community to recognize the ongoing injustices for marginalized communities, like individuals with autism. We encourage schools, businesses, and individuals to reach out to us to learn more about Autism, and access resources to help create a more inclusive community.

We also want to support efforts to review and appeal Matthew’s sentence through this change.org petition and to assure his Autism diagnosis is not influencing a disproportionate punishment. Please contact our office at 757-461-4474, or email at contactus@tidewaterasa.org to receive more information.