

TAKE ACTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

# PROTECT IMMIGRANTS AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS IN ICE DETENTION FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As the world responds to an unprecedented crisis unfolding from the COVID-19 pandemic, people, locked up in U.S. immigration detention face these uncertain times while left behind in facilities -- where crowded conditions place them at increased risk of infection and where access to medical care may be limited.

Detained immigrants and asylum-seekers face grave risks including illness and even death if exposed to infection in immigration detention facilities — where rapid spread within crowded centers may occur. Many of them are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 because of their age or serious medical needs. Conditions in immigration detention are well-documented to have substandard medical care, inadequate basic hygiene, and overcrowding.

**All people should have the same access to care and safety — and immigrants and asylum-seekers must not be treated as an afterthought.**

The U.S. government is responsible for the health and safety of people in its custody and must take steps to mitigate the risk of infection, illness, and death for these families and individuals, as well as facility staff. The government must immediately release immigrants and asylum-seekers from detention. Many detained immigrants have long-standing family, faith, and other communities in the U.S. who could safely house them if they were released.

**Tell the U.S. government it must immediately release immigrants and asylum-seekers from immigration detention — to protect them and prioritize their safety and the safety of others as it responds to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf and Deputy Director Albence:

In response to the humanitarian and public health challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, I urge you to exercise your authority to ensure that your agencies take critical steps to mitigate the risk of infection, illness, and death for families and individuals in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody, as well as facility staff. One of the most critical steps your agencies can immediately implement is to release the immigrants and asylum-seekers held in ICE federal detention facilities and county and local jails.

Detained individuals will face grave risks if exposed to infection in immigration detention facilities, where rapid spread within crowded centers is of major concern. Many individuals in immigration detention are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their age or serious medical needs. Conditions in immigration detention are well-documented to have substandard medical care, inadequate basic hygiene, and overcrowding.

The release of immigrants in civil, administrative detention is warranted in the public interest to reduce the number of individuals in detention facilities, prisons and jails to limit the spread of COVID-19 to both detainees and staff and ensure that medical staff—and area hospitals—have the capacity to manage COVID-19 cases that may arise. Public health experts have already recommended reducing prison and detention populations.

Your agencies are responsible for the health and safety of the immigrants and asylum-seekers detained in ICE facilities and must take all appropriate steps to protect these individuals from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many immigrants currently detained are longtime residents of the U.S. who were taken from established lives in this country, and many others, including asylum-seekers, have close family, faith and other community ties who would help house them.

I urge your field offices to proactively work with local legal, humanitarian, faith-based, health and community organizations -- as well as state and local public health officials -- to swiftly and safely reduce the populations of immigration detention facilities and mitigate the inevitable spread of COVID-19 to individuals and families held in these facilities.

Communication and coordination are also needed to ensure that those with underlying health needs receive continuous medical care upon release. For all releases, ICE should communicate with the detainee, their attorney and family, as well as with community and local health resources to ensure any necessary care and to coordinate safe travel arrangements for detainees who are released from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,