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More Than a Dozen Immigrant Rights Groups Focus Grassroots Attention on Governors, State Health Officials to Direct Release of Immigration Detainees to Protect Against COVID-19

WASHINGTON - Nearly two dozen human rights, immigrant rights, and civil rights advocates and service providers are coming together to seek the release of immigrants and asylum-seekers in detention.

In the face of continued refusal by federal authorities to use discretion to release people from immigration detention, the groups will leverage the influence of their grassroots supporters to petition the governors of California, Louisiana, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas and Washington to take action to urge Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to release immigrants and asylum-seekers in detention. Releasing people in immigration detention will not only protect them but also facility staff and the communities where detention centers are located in their states, the groups said.

“As the government official responsible for the health and safety of your state’s residents, I urge you to take all possible actions to press ICE to release immigrants and asylum-seekers detained in [your state] without delay and that all appropriate steps are taken to protect them, facility staff, and the broader public from the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in ICE detention facilities,” read the petition sent to Governors Gavin Newsom, Phil Murphy, Tom Wolf, John Bel Edwards, Greg Abbott and Jay Inslee.

Today’s action represents stepped-up pressure from human rights, immigrant rights, and civil rights advocates and service providers to urge governors and state-level health officials to act. In early March, some of these same groups [urged](#) state and local governments to release those held in ICE custody. But ICE continues to detain vulnerable individuals in conditions ripe for the spread of disease, even in detention centers where staff and/or other detainees have already tested positive for COVID-19.

The groups are:

- ALDEA - The People’s Justice Center (PA)
- [Amnesty International USA](#) (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX, LA)
- Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) (CA)
- [Centro Legal de la Raza](#) (CA)
- Families Belong Together (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX, LA)
- [Human Rights First](#) (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX, LA)
- [Human Rights Watch](#) (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX, LA)
- Immigrant Defense Advocates (CA)
- Immigration Justice Campaign, an initiative of the American Immigration Lawyers Association and the American Immigration Council (NJ)

- Innovation Law Lab (CA LA TX)
- ISLA Immigration Services and Legal Advocacy (LA)
- The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (CA)
- National Immigrant Justice Center (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX, LA)
- Never Again Action (CA, WA, NJ, PA)
- Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (WA)
- OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX, LA)
- Oxfam America (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX)
- Physicians for Human Rights (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX, LA)
- RAICES (TX)
- SPLC Action Fund (LA)
- [Women's Refugee Commission](#) (CA, WA, NJ, PA, TX, LA)

Public health experts [predict](#) that - unless ICE drastically reduces the numbers of detained immigrants in its care - once there are five or more cases in a facility between 72 percent and 100 percent of detainees in that facility could contract COVID-19 within a 90-day period. Continued detention endangers detainees and could overwhelm hospital capacity, impacting the health of the local communities where detention centers are located. Already one immigrant in [detention has died](#) of COVID-19 at the Otay Mesa Detention Center in California.

In a joint statement, the groups are asking these governors to take action and stand up to ICE in a collective action:

“ICE has a well-documented history of medical abuse and neglect. Since the onset of the pandemic, ICE facilities have failed to provide detainees with sufficient soap and sanitizer, neglected to facilitate physical distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within crowded facilities, and continued to transfer detainees between facilities at grave risk to their health. Even before COVID-19, the needless, arbitrary detention of immigrants and asylum-seekers in inadequate conditions with negligent medical care violated human rights and caused untold human suffering.

“We are coming together to amplify pressure on ICE to act. As states address the public health and humanitarian challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are urging governors to use their public health authority to press ICE and federal immigration detention facilities and county and local jails and prisons to immediately and substantially reduce occupancy in facilities detaining immigrants and asylum-seekers. We hope that they will hear us and act swiftly to save lives.”

To learn more about this effort visit

Amnesty International USA:

<https://rightsnow.amnestyusa.org/free-people-from-ice-detention/>

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