Shut It Down!

The 2021 Grassroots Movement to Abolish ICE Detention in New Jersey

ABOLISH ICE NY NJ

IMMIGRANT & NON-CITIZEN RIGHTS CLINIC

CUNY SCHOOL OF LAW

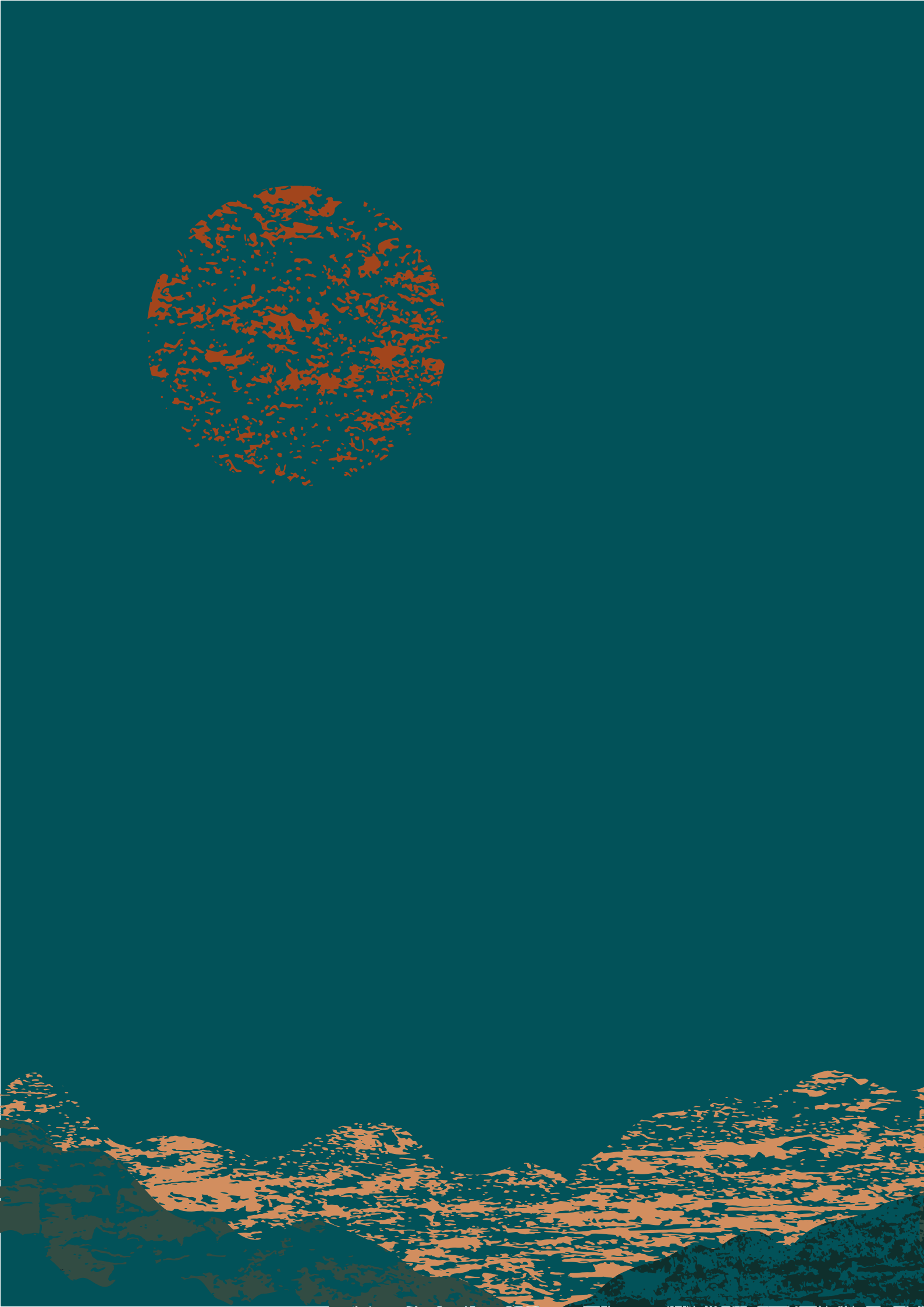

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Shut it Down!: The 2021 Grassroots Movement to Abolish ICE Detention in New Jersey

This report documents the grassroots organizing, advocacy, and legal strategies led by members of the Abolish ICE NY-NJ Coalition to end ICE detention in New Jersey. It captures the collective efforts of impacted communities, activists, and allies who came together in 2021 to challenge and ultimately shut down three immigrant detention facilities in New Jersey.

This report was written by City University of New York School of Law's Immigrant & Non-Citizen Rights Clinic (CUNY INRC) in partnership with the Abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement New York-New Jersey coalition (Abolish ICE NY-NJ).

CUNY INRC was one of the first immigration law clinics in the country and trains future social justice lawyers to help close the growing legal divide between citizens and non-citizens in the United States. Student attorneys are activists with deep ties to immigrant communities and lived experiences within the immigration system. This drives their commitment to and engagement with systemic change.

Abolish ICE NY-NJ's mission is to coordinate among organizations, activist networks and directly impacted people who organize for the abolition of detention and incarceration in New York and New Jersey and broaden, strengthen and popularize the movement for abolition across the two states. Abolish ICE NY-NJ recognizes that all members come to the coalition with differing concerns, needs, abilities, resources, passions, and perspectives with a united goal of abolishing ICE detention centers, and prisons. It utilizes a community consensus-building process to identify priorities for action and encourages all members to share and pool their resources and abilities to address community concerns. Abolish ICE NY-NJ envisions an end to detention, ICE, jails, prisons, and policies that criminalize immigrants, specifically focused on New York and New Jersey. The coalition believes that because diverse communities are impacted by detention and deportation, especially Black and brown communities, their leadership and stories should be centered and uplifted as they are an essential and necessary part of the struggle for immigrant rights.

To protect the privacy of formerly detained individuals, this report uses first names or aliases where appropriate.

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Cosecha New Jersey
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Note on Scope and Currency of Information

This report is based on research completed in May 2025 and reflects the state of immigration law, policy, and detention practices as of that date. Readers should be aware that immigration enforcement and detention are subject to frequent legal and policy changes. As such, this report may not reflect the most current developments. We encourage readers to consult up-to-date sources to verify the current legal and political landscape surrounding immigration detention in the United States.

Executive Summary

The United States is the world's leading jailer of immigrants. In recent years, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) practice of warehousing non citizens in jails has exploded, aided by private corporations and state and local governments. The proliferation of the immigrant detention-industrial complex and the state violence committed against non citizens within detention walls has inspired many of the individuals caught in its grasp—along with their families, advocates, and communities—to unite in dismantling this punitive carceral system. As the Trump Administration upends due process for immigrants, tramples core constitutional rights, and expands its detention capacity, the grassroots fight to abolish immigration detention is more important than ever.

This report chronicles the strategies, accomplishments, and lessons learned from one local organizing effort. The group, known as Abolish ICE New York-New Jersey (Abolish ICE NY-NJ), came together in 2018 as a coalition of directly-impacted detained individuals and their families, immigrant rights non-profits, community organizers, and lawyers. Abolish ICE NY-NJ sought to end local detention center contracts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the component of DHS responsible for immigration detention. Their collaboration, built upon decades of grassroots organizing by local activists in the communities where the detention centers were located, pushed several New Jersey counties—Bergen, Essex and Hudson—to end their long-standing agreements with ICE in 2021.

What follows is an examination of how Abolish ICE NY-NJ achieved the closure of immigration detention facilities in 2021 through strategic planning and coalition-building. Members of the group shared their reflections through hundreds of hours of interviews. This report takes stock of the group's successes, including the closure of three out of four detention centers in New Jersey; evaluates the challenges they faced, including ICE's unchecked power to transfer detained individuals to remote facilities; and reveals the lessons learned from the group's steadfast commitment to ending immigration detention in New Jersey. **The hope is that sharing these narratives will inspire nationwide support for ending immigration detention once and for all. Never has the fight been more important, as the Trump Administration seeks to vastly expand the federal government's detention capability to fulfill its racist and xenophobic anti-immigrant agenda.**

Chapter I provides historical background on the rise of immigration detention in the United States, and specifically examines the origins of New Jersey's immigration detention centers, where local governments and private corporations colluded with ICE to profit from the incarceration of immigrants. Chapter II describes the appalling conditions that are a hallmark of immigration detention, including ICE's failure to protect non citizens detained in the epicenter of the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

Chapter III chronicles, through oral history, the formation of the Abolish ICE NY-NJ coalition across state lines, with the common goal of ending ICE detention in New Jersey. It details how the group carefully mapped their approach by tailoring strategies to each county, using power mapping and taking direct action to successfully close detention centers. Chapter IV discusses ICE's retaliatory response to the closures, including using its unilateral transfer authority to send detained individuals to other jails throughout the country. This chapter outlines the harmful effects of transfers on detained individuals and their families, and recognizes the coalition's steadfast commitment to abolition while deploying mitigation and support strategies to those impacted by transfers.

Chapter V of this report concludes with lessons learned by the coalition, as told by the organizers themselves, and provides an update on the current state of local ICE detention. This includes attempts by DHS and private corporations to reopen and expand facilities in the very same New Jersey communities from which they were banned.

Chapter I

The Rise of Immigration Detention in the U.S. and in New Jersey

The Creation of ICE and the Modern Detention System

Since the 19th Century, the United States has detained non-citizens.[1] By the end of the 1970s, the system remained fairly "modest" in scope, holding less than 3,000 immigrants.[2] Modern detention took hold in the 1990s, with the passage of several laws that significantly expanded who could be detained and for what reasons.[3] Following the events of September 11, 2001, the federal government restructured the immigration system as part of an effort to double down on "national security". [4]

In November 2002, Congress passed the Homeland Security Act, establishing the DHS.[5] DHS houses ICE, whose mission is to apprehend, detain, and prosecute removable non-citizens.[6] The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) vests ICE with broad statutory detention powers,[7] and the agency wields far-reaching discretionary power on who it detains, including people whose only violation of immigration law relates to status or entry.[8]

The creation of DHS and ICE transformed the government's capacity to arrest and detain non-citizens, resulting in a nearly five-fold increase in government spending on incarceration of immigrants accused of committing civil violations.[9] New aggressive policies also expanded ICE's web, increasing the number of immigrants the agency targets. For instance, Section 287(g) of the INA allows ICE to enter into agreements with state and local law enforcement, deputizing them with authority to enforce federal immigration laws.[10] The use of immigration detainers—requests to state and local jails to facilitate transfer of an immigrant into ICE custody—have cemented a jail-to-immigration-detention pipeline.[11]

As a result of these and other policies, the detention system has "morphed into a sprawling machinery ensnaring immigrants across the country"[12] with 47,892 in ICE detention according to data as of March 23, 2025.[13] The sheer number of facilities holding ICE detainees has increased as well. As of March 17, 2025, ICE reported holding detainees in over 134 different facilities spread across the states and territories of the U.S. [14] Congress continues to funnel money to ICE at obscene levels. Proposals posted online by the Trump Administration call for more than $45 billion in ICE spending allowances over the next two years (in the previous fiscal year, the department was allocated $3.5 billion). [15]

ICE[16] uses a diverse range of facilities, leveraging relationships with the private prison network and the existing infrastructure of local jails to maintain its massive, punitive apparatus.

Examples of Different Facilities:

- **Service Processing Centers (SPC):** ICE-own facilities operated by contracted staff.
- **Contract Detention Facilities (CDF):** Owned by private prisons which contract with ICE.
- **Intergovernmental Service Agreements (IGSA):** Agreements that allow local and state governments to operate detention facilities, many of which are at city and county jails. Local and state governments then subcontract with private prison companies to operate the facilities.
- **Federal Bureau of Prisons Facilities:** facilities that typically hold those convicted of federal criminal offenses, but ICE can also hold those who do not have a criminal record.[17]

Private corporations are incentivized to profit from the human suffering of immigrants, receiving millions of dollars from the federal government in exchange for guaranteed bedspace.

In 2022, nearly half of the private corporation GEO Group's $2.4 billion revenue came from ICE contracts.[19] This relationship has not changed during Democratic administrations. During his Presidential campaign in 2020, President Biden proclaimed "[n]o business should profit from the suffering of desperate people fleeing violence."[20] In reality, there was a "boom in private prison revenues from ICE contracts during the Biden Administration and an increase in the percentage of detainees being held in private facilities."[21]

State and local governments also have powerful financial incentives to get involved in the business of housing immigrants through IGSAs; in some areas, the federal government pays nearly three times as much as state governments for empty bed space.[22] Overall, detention facilities create perceived "gold rush" opportunities for local governments and private companies, who ultimately profit from the large-scale incarceration of immigrants for largely civil, immigration-related violations.[23]

ICE Detention in New Jersey[24]

In the 1990s and early 2000s, four facilities that detained immigrants opened in New Jersey. Elizabeth Detention Center (Elizabeth) opened first in 1993, when a private corporation, Esmor Correctional Services, entered into a $54 million contract with to "the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).[25] to house immigrant detainees.[26] By 2005, Elizabeth had switched hands to the monolithic corporation CoreCivic, a notorious company that owns and manages private prisons and detention centers across North America.[27]

In 1996, Hudson County Correctional Facility (Hudson), which typically held individuals awaiting trial in the local criminal court system, entered into an IGSA with the former INS, the first in New Jersey.[28] The contract proved lucrative for Hudson County, which by 2019, was charging ICE $120 per detainee, per day, amounting to $20.5 million in revenue that year.[29] A second IGSA followed between Bergen County and the U.S. Marshals Service in 2001, for Bergen County Jail (Bergen); the contract specifically allows for ICE to use the facility, and most recently charged ICE as much as $110 per person per day. For more than two decades the Bergen agreement—which had no end date—resulted in the detention of thousands of immigrants.[30]

In 2011, ICE entered into its third New Jersey IGSA with Essex County.[31] The county agreed to detain immigrants at the county jail, the Essex County Correctional Facility (Essex), and contracted to detain others at a privately run facility, Delaney Hall, right next door. [32] At the time, ICE hailed this as a model for detention across the country.[33] Delaney Hall closed in 2017,[34] but ICE continued to detain people at the Essex County jail. In 2018, ICE paid Essex County $124 per detained individual, per day—one of the highest per-bed rates in the U.S. The county received nearly $35 million from ICE just for that year, and the facility's daily incarcerated immigrant population at any given time reached nearly 800 individuals.[35]

Before COVID-19, these four New Jersey detention facilities—Elizabeth, Bergen, Essex and Hudson—housed a daily average of 2,000 immigrants awaiting immigration proceedings in New York and New Jersey.[36] The county governments—all of which were controlled by Democrats—cashed in on President Trump's violent enforcement regime, raking in $6 million a month from detaining immigrants.[37]

As described in detail in Chapter II, like other immigration detention centers throughout the country, these four facilities were the sites of rampant human rights abuses.

Chapter II

The Human Toll of Immigrant Incarceration in NJ

" My son [...] was in solitary confinement, he was only able to come out one hour a day and just because people don't have status that does not mean that they don't have rights and that they don't deserve to be treated with dignity and compassion, "

Sandra, mother of a detained 23-year-old man.[38]

"The most generous justification of ICE detention is to make sure that people show up to court but detention in general is actually harmful to due process[...] A lot of people are unwilling to fight their cases if they have to be detained during their process,"

Anna Byers, immigration attorney, American Friends Service Committee.[39]

The federal government—and, as referenced in Chapter I, the private, state, and local entities that collude with it to achieve profit from imprisonment—has built a punitive immigration detention system that erodes the mental, physical, and emotional health of its victims. This case study within New Jersey reveals these dynamics.

The appalling conditions within immigration detention, which are well-documented and summarized below, provide necessary context to understand the efforts the coalition made to shut down these facilities as immediately as possible. And while detention conditions have always been punishing, the situation took on new urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic revealed how immigration detainees were "sitting ducks" for disease and death,[40] and further exposed ICE as a cruel agency intent on inflicting harm on immigrant communities.

Conditions of Confinement

Although immigration detention is technically considered "civil" confinement,[41] people in ICE custody are held in the same—or sometimes worse—punitive conditions as those in criminal custody. Like individuals confined by the criminal legal system, immigrant detainees are forced to wear prison uniforms, are held in cells, and suffer restrictions on their freedom of movement.[42]

While ICE has its own guidelines on care in detention,[43] the agency is frequently in violation of its own standards, which are assessed by the DHS Office of the Inspector General (OIG). In 2019, the OIG conducted unannounced visits at four detention facilities throughout the country, including Essex, where it uncovered numerous conditions "that endanger detainee health."[44] Investigators found that "open packages of raw chicken leaked blood all over refrigeration units[]; lunch meat was slimy, foul smelling and appeared to be spoiled; and moldy bread was stored in the refrigerator."[45] The report also detailed unjustified strip searches, the use of restraints, and the failure to provide basic toiletries to detainees.[46]

Abuse within detention facilities is rampant and well-documented. In 2021, detained individuals at Bergen submitted complaints to DHS's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, complaining of "medical abuse, sexual assault, religious discrimination, deplorable conditions, retaliation for peaceful protest and public reporting, ICE failing to follow court orders and release high-risk individuals suffering from complications related to COVID-19, and use of force and physical abuse at the hands of ICE guards, sergeants, and lieutenants."[47]

Many individuals, including those detained at local New Jersey facilities, have been subjected to solitary confinement—isolation within small cells, sometimes for such long periods of time that it "would meet the definition of torture, or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under international human rights law."[48] Such "segregation" has been weaponized by ICE, including as "retaliation for bringing issues to light, such as submitting complaints or participating in hunger strikes."[49]

Hundreds of incidents of sexual abuse have largely gone uninvestigated by ICE.[50] An investigation by Futuro Media in 2023 revealed "a systemic pattern of abuse by detention officers, contractual guards, and ICE employees, accused of sexually assaulting the individuals they are meant to protect" and that "more than half of all abuse allegations made in the past six years were directed against staff."[51] As described below, Black, trans, and non-binary migrants are singled out for abuse and mistreatment.[52]

Detention centers notoriously fail to provide physical and mental healthcare, putting detainees' well-being at risk and in some cases, resulting in tragic deaths in detention. Widespread deficiencies include denials or extreme delays in treatment, inability to manage chronic illnesses, lack of sufficient medical staff, and inadequate treatment of pain.[53] A recent report by Physicians for Human Rights and others found that 49 out of 52 deaths in ICE custody (95%) between January 1, 2017 and December 31, 2021 "were preventable or possibly preventable if appropriate medical care had been provided."[54]

In New Jersey, Hudson was the site of the most deaths. Seventeen migrants died between 2013-2021, largely from medical neglect or suicide.[55] Despite the obvious and serious issues with medical care at the facility during this time, Hudson County voted to extend its contract with its medical provider in 2018.[56] Walter Omar, a man detained at Hudson developed a fungal infection just before he was transferred to Orange County Correctional Facility (Orange) in New York. Upon arriving at Orange, Omar alerted the nurse to his infection, and was told that they would take care of him

later—but they never did. After submitting over fifty unanswered requests to see the doctor, Omar was desperate and turned to a fellow detainee for help. Later, a doctor finally saw Omar, after his right leg developed a large lump that prevented him from walking. As he recalled:

> **The lump on my leg finally burst and started bleeding and pussing. When an officer brought me my food, I told him I couldn't walk or get up because of my leg. When I showed him my bloody leg he left and called the doctor... I was finally able to see the doctor...it had to come to this severe situation for them to notice or care. If he hadn't seen blood, I would not have gotten help.[57]**
>
> -Walter Omar, individual detained at Hudson

One detainee with diabetes reported being served food that was inconsistent with his specialized diet and made him feel sick.[58] The agency and its detention centers also struggled with preparedness for disease outbreaks.[59] These deplorable conditions were the baseline of ICE's medical care in detention, setting the scene for COVID-19's rampage through detention centers, as described below.

Disproportionate Impact on Black & Marginalized Immigrants

The U.S. immigration machine—itself a tool of white supremacy[60]—has successfully exploited the racism inherent in the criminal legal system to create a "prison-to-deportation-pipeline" that disproportionately impacts Black and brown immigrants.[61] Individual and systemic biases pervade the criminal legal system and people of color, especially Black individuals, have been disproportionately targeted, surveilled, arrested, convicted and imprisoned.[62] Simultaneously, the legislative and executive branches have prioritized the apprehension and removal of non citizens who have had contact with the criminal legal system.[63] Because of this prioritization, and the systemic racism inherent in both systems, "[m]ore than one out of every five people facing deportation on criminal grounds before the EOIR is Black"—even though Black immigrants are only 7.2 percent of the non-citizen population in the United States.[64] This is the reality of the immigration deportation machine, even though there is "no evidence that Black immigrants commit crime at greater rates than other immigrants."[65]

Even Black immigrants who have not had contact with the criminal legal system face discrimination due to inherent biases by individual adjudicators. These include asylum officers and CBP officials making life-altering decisions at the border about who has access to asylum, and immigration judges making decisions about credibility in administrative courts. Asylum seekers from Black-majority countries are deemed "not credible" during fear screening interviews at greater rates than other nationalities, and disproportionately to their share of the asylum-seeking population as a whole.[66]

Once inside detention centers, Black immigrants face steeper hurdles to release and disproportionate levels of physical and emotional violence. One report showed that Haitian immigrants' bonds were on average 54 percent higher than for immigrants from other countries, resulting in longer periods of detention.[67] Black detainees are more likely to be placed in solitary confinement.[68] Even though Black immigrants make up only 6 percent of the detained population, 28 percent of all "abuse-related reports" made to the hotline run by Freedom for Immigrants were by Black immigrants.[69] The rates of abuse were even more significant in the South, where "[t]he legacies of violence and trauma that occurred in plantations and convict leasing prisons now continues [sic] inside immigration detention centers."[70]

“I can’t touch him,
I can’t hold him.
I can’t even hug him....

Immigrants who are members of other marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ and disabled individuals, also experience even greater disproportionate violence and abuse in immigration detention. A recent study by National Immigrant Justice Center revealed that a third of the participants they surveyed reported sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and physical assaults, based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.[71] Individuals with disabilities "experience[d] additional trauma, isolation, worsening of their disabilities, medical and mental health neglect, solitary confinement, and communication challenges with their attorneys, all of which prevent them from preparing and presenting their case to the immigration court."[72]

Prolonged Detention

These horrible conditions of confinement are compounded by the sheer amount of time that many non-citizens are detained before their cases resolve—sometimes for years.[73] Individuals subjected to "mandatory detention," including those with certain criminal convictions, are ineligible to ask for a bond from an immigration judge and must remain locked up while they attempt to navigate their immigration case.[74] Even if a non-citizen is eligible for a bond hearing,[75] that does not mean an immigration judge will grant them a bond or will set one within their financial limitations. Recent studies have shown that the average amount of immigration bonds was around $11,000,[76] which must be paid in full, unlike the 10 percent typical required for criminal court bonds.[77] The system, thus, results in many non citizens who are eligible for bonds to remain incarcerated, because the government systematically sets bonds too high for them to afford.[78] Because many non-citizens and their families cannot afford to pay the immigration bonds, they fall prey to the bond systems created by immigration bond companies.[79] These exorbitant fees and the predatory nature of bond companies leave many detainees with little choice but to opt for deportation, rather than endure the prolonged inhumane detention conditions.[80] High bond, coupled with inhumane conditions in detention centers, are policy choices the US government had made which forces people to give up their viable claims for immigration relief and instead concede to deportation.[81] Although ICE always has the discretion to release people on alternatives to detention—even individuals considered subject to mandatory detention—the agency often opts to detain.[82]

Being torn from loved ones takes a significant toll on detainees. At Bergen, individuals were long refused contact visits with their family members.[83] Carlos, a detainee at Bergen, spoke of the difficulty of being in immigration custody for 8 months of his one-year-old's life, and missing milestones: "I can't touch him, I can't hold him. I can't even hug him . . . It's really hard because he walks now and when I left him, he wasn't walking yet, he wasn't even crawling yet, and now he's growing up and I'm not there to support him paternally."[84] Another Bergen detainee was dismayed that the only way he could see his children was through an electronic tablet, which was expensive and disconnected frequently.[85]

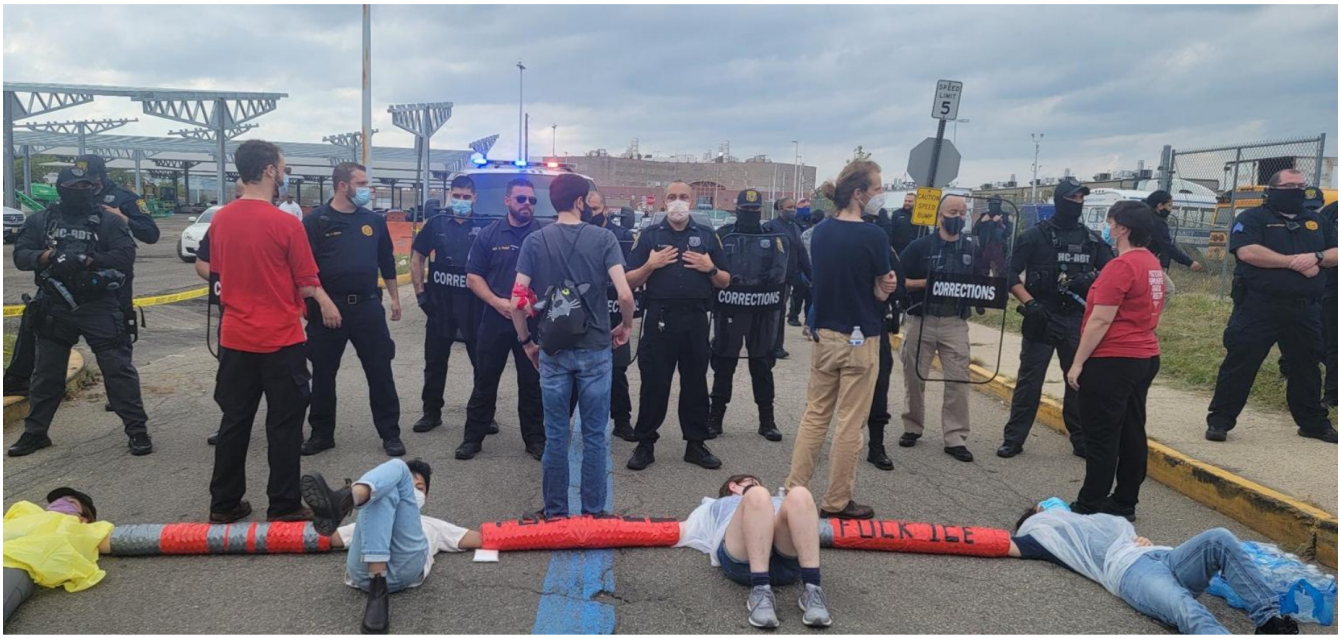
ICE's Failed Response to COVID-19 and Severe Health Consequences

The long-standing inadequacies of medical care in ICE facilities described above, coupled with the agency's lack of preparedness for an infectious disease outbreak, created a tinderbox situation at the outset of COVID-19. On March 24, 2020, a man detained at Bergen became the first individual in U.S. immigration detention to test positive for COVID-19.[86] By April 2020—just weeks after the first detainee tested positive—New Jersey had become an "early epicenter" of the pandemic, and the state with the most COVID-19 cases among immigrant detainees.[87] By December 2020, at least eight people had died of COVID-19 in ICE facilities, and COVID-19 had infected more than 12 percent of the detained population.[88]

The spread of COVID-19 within immigration detention was devastating, but certainly not surprising, given ICE's reckless history and apathetic approach to the treatment of migrants in its care. By the time the COVID-19 outbreak hit, DHS had failed for years to implement several pandemic-planning recommendations from the OIG, including ensuring proper levels of personal protective equipment.[89] People in detention were unable to protect themselves without sufficient masks, cleaning products, hand sanitizer, or the ability to social distance.[90]

A report by the House Oversight Committee, released in September 2020, confirmed that individuals in ICE custody encountered serious health risks due to poor handling of infectious diseases and deficient sanitation practices.[91] A family member of an individual detained in New Jersey expressed that when her brother Antonio tested positive, he only received an aspirin, which reporting has shown to be common practice.[92] In addition, Antonio was unable to see a doctor until after his symptoms had subsided. The family member stated:

The only reason the doctor had even seen him was because they were checking his medication. He would tell us about how they weren't being checked on when they were ill with COVID-19. Some of the others who tested positive were just dropped in cells and left there for their quarantine period. They put Antonio in solitary confinement by locking him in his cell and would only let him and the others out for 5 minutes a day. They let them eat but nothing more.[93]



The detention centers frequently utilized solitary confinement for days or weeks as a quarantine tool, forcing immigrants to shield officers from their symptoms. An individual detained in New Jersey during this period, Marciel, shared:

> *There were 5 days that I couldn't get up, I had terrible body aches, chills, and a fever. I didn't tell anyone because I didn't want to be put in quarantine. It is honestly very common here, for the men to get sick and not say anything. It's hard to be detained in quarantine, extremely hard, it's sad and no one wants to be in that isolated position where you get depressed, you can't go outside and all you get is 5 minutes to shower. They even time your shower, sometimes being in the shower is at least a moment you get to kind of relax maybe, but in quarantine they even take that away from you.*[94]

The detained population, which generally can be transferred at will by ICE around the country with little notice and accountability, infra Chapter IV, faced further pandemic-related isolation and restrictions when moved to new facilities. Omar, who was transferred to Orange in New York, was held in quarantine for 16 days.[95] Morales was transferred from Essex to Bergen and forced to spend 18 days in quarantine. He recounts:

> *They put two of us in each cell for quarantine, they weren't letting us out of the cell, they said it would only be three days while they did COVID tests, but it was longer... We had to use the bathroom sink water to drink, we couldn't speak to our families.*[96]

Family members suffered emotionally as they feared for the safety of their loved ones languishing in detention. Laura McMaster, married to a Haitian immigrant, Patrick Julney, who was in ICE detention for almost three years, explained:

> *I didn't hear from Patrick for two weeks after his transfer [to another detention facility]. He later told me that they didn't get call privileges during quarantine, they just left them in their cells, they didn't do daily temperature checks . . . . after two weeks, officers said he could go back to the general population. [He told me] there was no social distancing, and no test was performed before he went back to genpop.*[97]

ICE detention is completely discretionary. The agency could have opened the jail doors during COVID-19—like many jurisdictions did in the criminal legal context, including New Jersey[98]—but ICE insisted on continuing its detention and deportation mission.[99] Absurdly, individuals detained in one wing of a local jail were released by the local government while the ICE detainees in another wing of the same facility were left to languish, awaiting contraction of COVID-19.[100] ICE continued to shuffle people from one detention center to the next for a myriad of arbitrary reasons, such as filling empty beds and faster deportation when transferred to border states, a process complicated by the spread of the disease throughout the nation and internationally.[101] The fact that ICE had no clear plan for vaccinating detainees compounded the issue.[102]

ICE's reckless response to COVID-19 and its utter disregard for the well-being of its detainees and residents of other countries further pushed advocates and communities to stand up and fight for ICE abolition.


santuario
COLUMBIA COUNTY
SANCTUARY MOVEMENT

Chapter III

The Formation and Strategies of the Abolish ICE Coalition and Successful Shuttering of Three NJ Detention Centers

"[U]nderstanding how the system works gives us an idea of what kinds of comrades we need at different levels.

We need people that understand . . . how to fight back in an immigration case, from the legal way to community organizers who can support others in creating a rapid response when someone faces deportation."

Haydi Torres, community organizer with Cosecha New Jersey.[103]

"Something that I have been taught since I was young is when powerful people try to take advantage of the weak, you have to do something about it. You can't just stand there with your arms crossed. If we don't take care of ourselves, no one is going to take care of us."

Lautaro (alias), hunger strike leader at Hudson.[104]

Building the Abolish ICE NY-NJ Coalition

Seeds of the Movement

The fight against ICE detention in New Jersey began shortly after the Elizabeth Detention Center opened in 1993. Detained immigrants themselves were the first advocates for abolition. On July 18, 1995, they organized an uprising to bring attention to their ongoing mistreatment and abuse.[105] The facility was briefly shut down, and people at Elizabeth were transferred elsewhere or deported.[106] The report concluded that the facility "was run like a secretive fief in which poorly trained and abusive guards preyed on immigrants, with little control from their supervisors."[107] Despite the scathing report, the facility was not shuttered and continues to house migrants today.[108]

Although Elizabeth remained open, community organizers and faith-based groups joined detained individuals and their family members in organizing around immigration detention across New Jersey. In 1997, a grassroots organization called the Interfaith Refugee Action Team- Elizabeth (IRATE) was created to provide pastoral care and social services for the individuals held in New Jersey detention.[109] In the late 1990s, IRATE merged into First Friends of NJ.[110] Kathy O'Leary, who joined the board of First Friends around 2010, recalled an early story regarding a bible study organized by the Archdiocese of Newark and the Jesuit Refugee Service:

> *They actually got thrown out because the reading for the week was the gospel of Matthew [] was: "I was imprisoned, and you visited me" and they wrote that on the board and that's what got them thrown out. The reason the warden gave was that they were giving people hope. That was a story that was part of the mythology of the whole movement that we told over and over again so that we would understand that was the essence of these facilities.* ***It's about destroying people's hopes so they will give up and go home.***[111]

First Friends expanded to become First Friends of NJ and NY.[112] In addition to supporting those inside detention, they offered a range of services to individuals who were released, such as short-term shelter, food assistance, transportation, legal referrals, and accompaniment to immigration hearings.[113]

Organizers in New Jersey also responded to the growing state violence against Muslims, South Asians, and Arabs following the events of September 11, 2001.[114] These communities were targeted by the government through new laws and policies, including a newly-established "counter-terrorism" program, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS).[115] NSEERs was used to detect, interrogate, detain, and deport individuals on the basis of race, religion and national origin. In the end, this program did not result in anycounter-terrorism convictions.[116] Organizations like Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) in New York organized and protested against the mass interrogations and detentions of Muslim immigrants in New Jersey detention centers.[117] DRUM coordinated a hotline for community members to call and report any hate crimes that they witnessed or experienced.[118] Callers reported everything from law enforcement smashing in front doors and snatching men from their homes, to children reporting their fathers leaving for work, but never coming back.[119]

Undeterred by the challenges and suffering, the organizing work continued in the area as long as ICE facilities remained open and operating in local communities.

Coalition Building

Inspired by a similar movement in California, the Abolish ICE NY-NJ Coalition held its first formal convening in 2018 to shut down area detention centers.[120] The group included established community organizers who had long supported those detained in Elizabeth, Essex, Hudson, and Bergen, and brought together other representatives from a range of organizations including DRUM, Envision Freedom Fund, Queer Detainee Empowerment Project (QDEP), and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI). They were joined by directly impacted individuals[121] and other allies. These included faith-based organizations, the ACLU of NJ, democratic socialists, abolitionists, academics, and legal service providers. The group coalesced around their shared goal of ending ICE detention in New Jersey.

Although Abolish ICE NY-NJ was focused primarily on New Jersey, the coalition's goals necessarily crossed state lines because many people arrested by ICE in New York were detained in New Jersey (New York City does not have a detention facility).[122] Alina Das, Professor of Clinical Law & Co-Director at the NYU School of Law's Immigrant Rights Clinic, noted that the coalition's ability "to connect across state lines was an incredibly valuable thing that the coalition worked hard on . . . certainly with challenges along the way, [but] really bringing together different groups and managing different perspectives on how to do this work."[123]

For many of the organizers, this work was an extension of their daily lives as they had been personally or directly impacted by the immigration legal system. Haydi Torres, a community organizer with Movimiento Cosecha, explained that for her, advocating against ICE was a skill learned in childhood. Prior to her work with Abolish ICE NY-NJ, Haydi supported her detained family members by filling commissary funds, and helped other individuals find access to attorneys.[124]

Abolish ICE NY-NJ held frequent strategy sessions where they identified their goals, discussed the most effective tools for meeting these objectives, and leveraged the unique and diverse expertise of its coalition members. It then put these ideas into action. Collectively, Abolish ICE NY-NJ provided public comments at local government meetings, supported state-wide legislation, coordinated mutual aid, spoke to media, and "phone zapped"—mass telephonic pressure campaigns—ICE and local elected officials. Members of the coalition took part in direct action at detention centers, including protests and hunger strikes in solidarity with those inside, and created and elevated social media campaigns to spread urgent messages from detained organizers. Two tactics were central to their actions: (1) following the lead of, and centering, those who were detained; and (2) power mapping to focus campaign efforts.[125]

Tactics for Change

Leadership of those Most Impacted

In building a coalition across state lines and between several organizations, each with their own mission and goals, many organizers reflected that it was critical, above all, to center the demands and amplify the voices of directly impacted individuals and their families.

The coalition took its cues from organizers in detention, who bore witness to, and personally experienced, the brutal violence of immigrant incarceration—and who were well-situated to gain and share detailed knowledge of ICE's dangerous practices and shadowy policies. Organizers in NJ detention centers called for and participated in direct actions, [126] including an "unprecedented wave of hunger strikes demanding release"[127]—often at great risk to their personal safety and security. While squalid conditions in New Jersey detention centers had frequently been protested through hunger strikes, the COVID-19 pandemic and negligent response by ICE created a sense of urgency, as the spread of the disease threatened the safety and lives of everyone in these facilities.[128] Alina Das echoed how the horrors of the pandemic "shed light on how jails are not places where people can ever receive appropriate care, and where a pandemic will of course be deadly... being yet another reason why releases were so important and why the contracts should end."[129] COVID-era hunger strikes made public the harms of detention, at a time when there was little to no access for counsel or family members to visit detention facilities.

A detained organizer named "Lautoro," who led hunger strikes in December 2020 and January 2021 at Hudson, described to Documented NY how the protests were "democratic," meaning detainees voted whether to continue or take a pause to see if their demands were met.[130] When jail officials or ICE failed to respond, the strikes continued indefinitely, bringing unwanted attention to the facilities' administration:

> *"[The people working at the jail] were very alarmed." To have a hunger strike in the middle of a pandemic is very dangerous. It was an extra pressure on them. On top of that there were things happening on the outside, people were covering it in the news. The directors didn't want that. They didn't want anyone to be talking about problems in the jail. It was the best moment for us to strike.*[131]

In November 2020, Marcial Morales Garcia led a hunger strike for nine days to protest ICE's refusal to release him from Bergen during the pandemic, despite his medical vulnerability that put him at high risk of fatality from the disease.[132] After striking for nine days, ICE released him on an ankle monitor without stating a reason. He reflected on the harrowing experience to Gothamist, stating "I was ready to die. I thought I was going to die. But thank God I didn't."[133] Seeing this example, other hunger strikers followed suit, demanding release.[134] At least six hunger strikers bravely refused food for 25 days. Four of them were rendered unconscious by that point.[135]

Following the lead of detained organizers, dozens of protestors gathered outside of Bergen in November 2020 in solidarity with the cause and hunger strike.[136] Sheriffs and officers outside the facility responded aggressively to protestors, nine of whom were arrested.[137] The day after the arrests, officers clad in riot gear stood outside the facility as protestors continued to gather outside and chant "Abolish ICE."[138] Thria Bernabe, who was affiliated with the now-disbanded Ridgewood for Black Liberation, recounted how "we saw a lot of confrontation and violence against Black and indigenous protesters."[139] Members of the coalition also participated in actions outside of Hudson, Essex and EDC.[140] Inside detention centers where hunger strikes were occurring, ICE retaliated by placing people in solitary confinement and transferring them.[141] The collaboration between protesters within and outside of the prison was essential to bring attention to the central demands of the campaign.

In addition to following the lead of those impacted, the Abolish ICE NY-NJ coalition supported and amplified detainee voices in a variety of other ways. Lawyers provided advice about the potential consequences of organizing and advocating within a facility, allowing incarcerated immigrants to make informed decisions on how to proceed. Advocates and organizers served as liaisons to assist detained individuals with participating in sign-on letters, joining congressional calls, conducting interviews with the media, and virtually attending and speaking at rallies via speaker phone.[142] Individuals who were released during the ongoing fight were able to participate in person, such as Mr. Morales Garcia, who gave powerful testimony at a local government meeting about the lack of heat and rat infestations, and having no choice but to drink toilet water to stay hydrated at Bergen.[143]

Samah Sisay, who at the time served as a Bertha Justice Fellow at the Center for Constitutional Rights, described the importance of supporting directly impacted groups and ensuring their presence and voices were heard at meetings, and using methods such as stipends to cover transportation costs:

> *We ask people, who are already being targeted by the system and then have other forms of oppression that are weighing down on them in their everyday lives, to take on the role of organizing against the system. It's our responsibility as those with resources to then ensure that they're able to do it by making that process easier.*

The various supports created trust between those in detention and their advocates outside the jail and ultimately built a powerful coalition.

Power Mapping

Another early and essential strategy of the coalition was power mapping: the identification of potential targets for advocacy by determining who has influence and decision-making ability in each scenario. In addition to the "who", power mapping identifies the critical "what"—what information, actions, or pressure will move those individuals or institutions to amend their behavior in support of the change that organizers seek.[144]

Abolish ICE NY-NJ used power mapping to prioritize and influence decision makers. For the county jails—Bergen, Essex and Hudson—this meant starting "hyper" locally, as Hector Oseguera, a coalition member explained.[145] Coalition members targeted local electeds and the country executive by, according to Brett Robertson, a member of North Jersey DSA, "going to [] meetings, giving comments, and sort of shaming them."[146] Kathy O'Leary, an advocate at Pax Christi, explained that maintaining pressure "by letting local people know they are part of the problem" was vital in creating a political climate where detention of migrants became a powerful weight on the shoulders of local public figures.[147]

For Bergen, Hudson, and Essex jails, activists also hoped to capitalize on the fact that their local governments were led by Democrats. Previous reporting by Matt Katz at WNYC exposed how Democratic officials in these counties were profiting significantly off then-President Trump's aggressive deportation machine.[148] As explained by Kathy O'Leary:

It was helpful for the Essex County executives to be continuously talking about what a triumph this contract was because of the money it was generating . . . that rhetoric from the county was very helpful to us in order to convince people that this was not about trying to keep people closer to their attorneys or to their loved ones, this was about generating revenue and that never goes well. When you take people and you use them as units of revenue, that takes you down a very dangerous path.[149]

In Hudson County, the nine-member (and entirely Democratic) Board of Chosen Freeholders[150] had voting power over contract renewals between the jail and ICE.[151] When the ICE-Hudson contract was up for renewal in November 2020, Abolish ICE NY-NJ was ready. At the freeholders' meeting, former detainees, immigration attorneys, elected officials, faith leaders, medical doctors, and community advocates offered over nine hours of public testimony in opposition to the renewal.[152] Despite overwhelming public opposition, the freeholders approved a ten-year contract to detain people at the Hudson County jail on behalf of ICE.[153] Tania Mattos, a member and spokesperson for the Abolish ICE NY-NJ Coalition, said:

> *Today the Hudson County freeholders not only went back on their word, but also rejected the will of communities in New York and New Jersey and their allies...By renewing the contract, Hudson County is inviting ICE to make more arrests to fill empty beds during a global pandemic. This vote only motivates us to work harder. Our communities will not stop fighting for a world that emphasizes dignity over detention.*[154]

Shortly after the vote, activists—many of whom were members of Abolish ICE NY-NJ—engaged in nightly actions and vigils in Jersey City outside of the home of Hudson County Executive Tom DeGise, who along with several freeholders obtained a temporary restraining order against multiple protestors.[155] The coalition also successfully targeted U.S. Senators Robert Menendez and Cory Booker, who had voiced strong opposition to President Trump's anti-immigration agenda, and pressured them to lean on their fellow Democrats in county seats to call for the ending of ICE contracts.[156] In a statement a week after the freeholders vote, Senator Booker stated, "[n]o private or

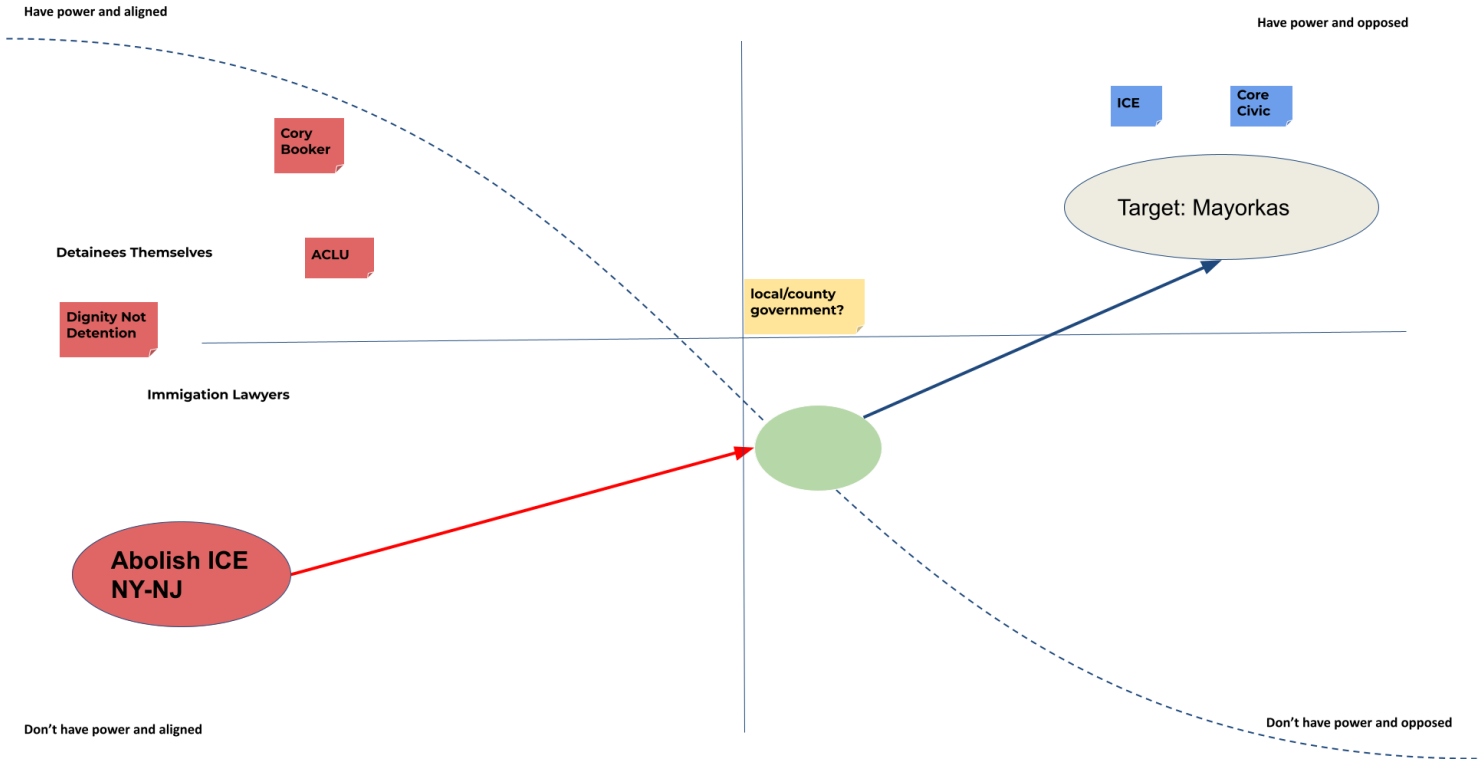
government entity should be contracting with ICE. These arrangements too often incentivize locking up people who pose no risk to the public, and perpetuate dangerous and dehumanizing immigration enforcement tactics."[157]

In August 2021, following pressure from advocates including the Abolish ICE NY-NJ coalition, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed a groundbreaking law that prohibited state and local entities, as well as private jails in New Jersey, from entering, renewing, or extending contracts with ICE.[158] The anti-detention law was the first of its kind on the East Coast. The Abolish ICE coalition members were among the advocates who strongly pushed for the bill to pass the New Jersey legislature, and for Governor Murphy to sign it.[159]

Momentum continued to build after Governor Murphy signed the law, as influential politicians in the state, including Senators Menendez and Booker, continued to call for the end of ICE detention altogether and termination of current contracts.[160] In September 2021, less than a year after Hudson County freeholders voted to extend ICE's contract for 10 years, Hudson County dramatically reversed course, announcing that it would end its contract with ICE and beginning on November 1, 2021, the facility there would no longer house or accept detainees.[161]

> "In Hudson County, they would have been very happy to continue to collect the money [from ICE]. I can say for a fact that I know it became a cost-benefit analysis with the political establishment, and they just didn't want us constantly emailing them, calling them, yelling at them, [or] showing up at their meetings....It just became too much of a political liability to them and they got sick of having to put up with it, and so they decided to get out of [the ICE contracts].[162]"
>
> Hector Oseguera, Activist, and Lifetime Hudson County resident

POWER MAPPING



A month after Hudson ended its contract, Bergen followed suit, citing the "prolonged protests by activists" over the course of the previous year, including the hunger strikes and solidarity protests described in detail above.[163] The jail began accepting more more individuals held on local criminal matters from a neighboring county, Passaic County, to fill bedspace.[164] Like Bergen, Essex announced (in April 2021) that it was depopulating its jail of ICE detainees, and accepting more criminal detainees from neighboring Union County. This more "lucrative" agreement allowed the county executive to claim the decision to shutter ICE detention was based on money, not politics.[165]

Once depopulation plans were announced at the county jails, advocates immediately called for releases and not transfers to other immigration detention facilities. As described in detail below, ICE's unbending commitment to mass incarceration led the agency to leverage its unilateral power to detain and transfer, with no community input or oversight.

Elizabeth was uniquely situated because, unlike the other facilities, the jail was privately operated and the contracts were not controlled by local officials. As organizer Brett Robertson explained:

> *"One of the things we're talking about when it comes to the Elizabeth Detention Center is, it's a little bit different with Essex, Hudson, and Bergen. [In those three jails and counties] we were able to exert pressure on the county commissioners, and county elected, and supervisor-type folks, and I think that was also somewhat effective because these are people who really don't want to be tarred in a particular way... I think there is some question with Elizabeth Detention Center because it's not as connected to local government, [so] it's a little harder to bring that pressure [] in the same way.[166]"*

This required creative advocacy in the organizing approach to Elizabeth. As explained by Uchechukwu Onwa, an organizer with the Queer Detainee Empowerment Project, "[w]e did some power mapping and research and were able to find out . . . who owns the property where Elizabeth Detention Center is."[167] Advocates zeroed in on the family-owned Elberon Development Group, which leased its property to CoreCivic, along with its connected owner Anne Evans Estabrook, and her son Dave Gibbons.[168] In October 2020, activists rallied at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, a nonprofit where Estabrook sat on the board, on the night of its annual charity benefit gala.[169] Estabrook and Gibbons also sat on the board of Kean University—a school with the second highest number of undocumented students in the state. The coalition and others did "phone zaps" to the school's president every Friday for months. In March 2021, they hand-delivered 1500 signatures, demanding that Estabrook and Gibbons be stripped of their seats and honorary titles.[170] The relentless pressure campaign led the landlords to file suit in May 2021, petitioning to break their lease with CoreCivic and claiming the conditions created by the jailers were unsafe.[171]

By the end of 2021, Elizabeth was the only jail in New Jersey that continued to incarcerate immigrants.[172] As further detailed in Chapter 5, CoreCivic successfully challenged the anti-detention law signed by Governor Murphy, and Elizabeth remains open to this day.

After years of activism aimed at terminating ICE contracts in New Jersey, including hunger strikes, coordinated protests within and outside the jails, three out of four ICE detention centers were shuttered.[173] Despite these tremendous collaborative efforts and the closures of three facilities, ICE's abhorrent commitment to the ongoing detention of immigrants meant that immigrants were still not able to be released to their families. The next chapter describes ICE's response to the closure of three facilities, the transfer process, and the advocacy and activism of the coalition in pursuit of abolition and liberation for those caught in its crosshairs. [174]

Chapter IV

Maintaining an Abolitionist Ethic in the Face of Transfers

"They chained my hands, to my feet and my stomach. They make us carry our belongings and get on the bus however we can. We can barely move. It is to humiliate us . . . they even did this to a 76-year-old man who was transferred in my group."

Walter, individual detained at Hudson and transferred to Orange County Correctional Facility.[175]

"ICE has complete discretion to release people, not to transfer people. Transferring people in the middle of the night, without any kind of real notice, without families and lawyers knowing, without people being able to take any kind of possessions with them and being put on a bus and taken at least five and a half hours away, is outrageous."

Jon Moscow, co-chair of the Northern NJ Sanctuary Coalition

As described in Chapter Three, decades of local organizing ultimately led several New Jersey counties to expel ICE from their jails, and the passage of a statewide law banning future contracts to detain immigrants. With ICE no longer able to incarcerate non citizens at the Bergen, Essex and Hudson facilities, Abolish ICE NY-NJ pushed ICE to use its discretion to immediately release people detained in those facilities to their families.

Instead, ICE transferred most people to out-of-state detention centers, thousands of miles away from their communities and attorneys.[176] Advocates condemned these transfers as retaliation, and a harmful perversion of their advocacy efforts.[177] The mass transfer experience forced the coalition to respond in real time to ICE's unilateral power to move detained persons, seemingly arbitrarily, throughout a nationwide network of prisons. This chapter details those efforts and the coalition's response.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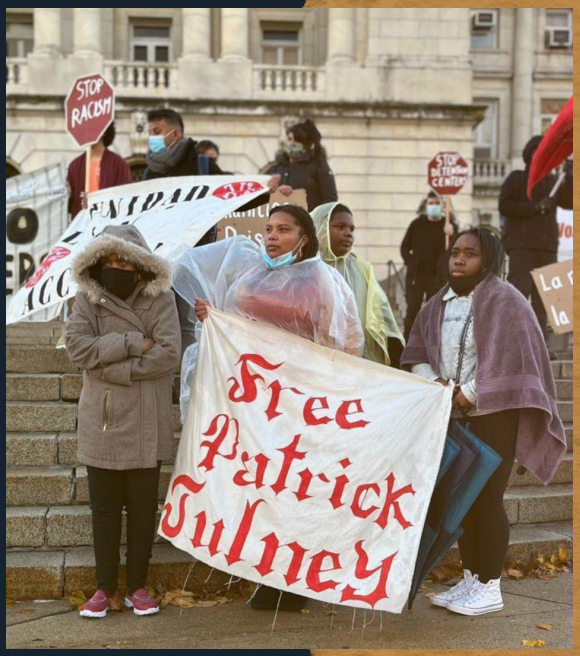

STOP RACISM
Free Patrick Tulney

ICE's Cruel Use of Its Transfer Authority

ICE maintains it has the unchecked power to detain individuals following arrest, wherever the agency pleases.[178] Detained individuals can be held far from their families, communities, and attorneys. Even when someone is detained locally, ICE has the power to transfer people to remote locations during their removal proceedings and while their cases are on appeal.[179] ICE also typically transfers individuals who are awaiting deportation to other detention centers, or "staging" areas, to facilitate deportation.[180]

ICE claims that the transfer process is safe, secure, and involves steps to ensure that a detainee's needs are met during and after transit.[181] But the reality is that ICE continuously fails to care for the people in its custody. People are often not informed of their transfer until immediately before they leave the facilities, compromising their ability to let loved ones and attorneys know where they will be moved to.[182] Detainees often arrive at the new facilities without commissary funds to make phone calls and have a difficult time alerting anyone about their new location. Advocates describe taking calls from "seriously hysterical family members—incredibly traumatized people—sobbing on the phone, crying out, 'I don't know where my son or husband is!'"[183] Transfers also negatively impact the physical and mental health of detainees. Although a "transfer summary"—including health issues and necessary medications—should be sent to the medical staff of the arrival facility, detainees often report gaps in information and medication during transfer and after arrival.[184]

During COVID-19, ICE transfers contributed significantly to the spread of the virus within and across detention centers—especially because ICE transferred individuals who had tested positive for the virus.[185] According to a study by University of Southern California (USC) researchers, the movement of detainees between various ICE facilities, often without adequate quarantine and testing measures, facilitated the transmission of the virus. The study noted that these transfers happened frequently and often involved individuals who had been exposed to COVID-19 or were symptomatic, thus increasing the risk of outbreaks in multiple locations.[186]

Beyond the acute COVID-19 crisis, being transferred from one facility to another only served to heighten the anxiety and psychological trauma that immigrants and their families experienced.[187] Psychologists have noted the isolation and desperation that transfers cause, explaining the psychological effects stem from "being separated from anyone who can be any kind of support to them."[188] Mothers, in particular, suffer severe psychological effects when they are transferred far away from their children.[189] These emotional factors can directly influence the outcome of legal proceedings, where feelings of desperation can cause immigrants to abandon their legitimate claims in order to be released from detention via deportation.[190]

Transfers also significantly interfered with the attorney-client relationship, by moving people far from their attorneys, or the ability to even secure an attorney. One of the biggest indicators of favorable immigration outcomes in removal proceedings is the presence of counsel. [191] ICE often transfers detainees between detention facilities without notifying their counsel, in violation of its own policy.[192] Although this notification should happen within 24 hours of the transfer,[193] attorneys report that it can sometimes be days before they have confirmation of where their clients have been moved to.[194] As a result, attorneys may fail to appear for a scheduled hearing because they were unaware of the transfer, or may suddenly find themselves thousands of miles away from their client with no warning.[195] Even assuming an attorney knows where their client has been transferred to, communication is difficult; each facility has its own requirements for legal calls, and often the time is limited and must be scheduled in advance.


BASS
DIABLO CREEK MX

Such transfers—especially to remote locations in the southern United States—also potentially render people ineligible for access-to-counsel programs in jurisdictions where the law is often weaker on protections for immigrants. In 2013, New York City invested in the nation's first public defender program for detained non citizens facing deportation, the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP).[196] New Jersey followed suit in 2018, launching the Detention and Deportation Defense Initiative (DDDI) to assist low-income non citizens who were detained to fight their deportations.[197] NYIFUP and DDDI represented a significant number of detained non citizens at the four New Jersey detention centers at the time of shutdown. While there have been a number of programs replication the universal representation model, many Southern states have no such resources and persons detained there are left to fight cases on their own.[198]

Overall, ICE transfer procedures highlight the systemic flaws that compromise detainee health and security, perpetuate the inhumane treatment of individuals, and fuel deportations.

ICE's Large-Scale Transfer of NJ Detainees

> *Lucino had heard from the news that they were being transferred. When he asked the officers, they wouldn't tell him when or where he would be going. They said that this was because people were protesting. They did not let Lucino contact us or his lawyer. They ended up moving him at two in the morning." - Elizabeth, wife of Lucino.*

As described above in Chapter Three, Essex became the first facility to announce that it would "depopulate" its jail of immigrant detainees in April 2021. The county gave ICE until August 2021 to move all ICE detainees at the jail.[199] The coalition pushed for immediate releases; however, ICE quickly issued a statement saying they would be transferring—not releasing—and were looking at options across the country.[200] The traumatic experiences of those subjected to sudden and brutal transfers framed how the coalition responded to the other closures.

In the pre-dawn hours of June 28, 2021 and June 29, 2021, armed guards, whose faces were covered by balaclavas, removed people from their jail cells, handcuffed and shackled them, and took them to a van.[201] ICE transferred 50 detained individuals from Essex across the country, including as far away as Louisiana and Nevada, without any notice to the detained individuals, their loved ones, or their attorneys.[202] Legal advocates denounced the clandestine transfers of their clients across state lines and throughout the country.[203] In many cases, people simply disappeared, with ICE deportation officers refusing to even respond to reasonable inquiries from counsel about their whereabouts. [204]

One detainee, Jose (pseudonym), was sent to Plymouth County Correctional Facility in Massachusetts, and said ICE did not let him take any of his papers or belongings with him:

> *They are saying, 'Buy new stuff.' But how? You don't know the problems my wife is dealing with. You don't know the troubles she's having feeding my kids. And my mother works seven days a week to give me $100 to buy food. I lost $600... And they put our stuff in the trash, as if everything that pertains to us is trash.*[205]

Coalition Support and Demands to ICE

Demands to ICE

Considering the trauma inflicted on those transferred from Essex, and ICE's continued opaque approach to transfers, Abolish ICE NY-NJ was forced to strike a delicate balance in advocating around the depopulation efforts at Bergen and Hudson. The coalition wanted to maintain their abolitionist ethic—calling for the dismantling of all prisons and the release of everyone—and also advocate within the existing system to mitigate the harmful effects of transfers upon a facility's closure, using methods such as asking for release with conditions, or asking for notice of transfers.

Although mass release was off the table, the coalition continued to prioritize liberty above all and demanded that ICE engage in individualized assessments of each detained person following each announcement of a closure—with a presumption of release. To ensure everyone had a fair shot at obtaining release in the event of closure, the coalition demanded a number of policies that centered notice and human dignity:

Demands:

- → A thirty-day period before any transfers, during which time non citizens or their advocates would have the opportunity to submit evidence to ask for release, with an option to extend the deadline if needed, and ability to continue submitting evidence following a transfer.
- → A freeze on all transfers during the 30-day period, including for persons with final orders of deportation, with an exception for those who chose to opt out of the freeze and accept removal.
- → Open communication with all detained individuals, and their attorneys if applicable, regarding opportunities, process, evidence deadlines, and timelines to seek release.
- → Protections for pro se individuals, including the provision of the names and A-numbers of all non citizens detained at the facility to local legal service providers in order to screen for services; the provision of all information regarding release in an incarcerated individual's preferred language; and the opportunity to seek legal counsel if they wanted it.
- → Unfettered access to phone and fax for detained individuals seeking to submit evidence in support of their release requests.
- → Detailed decisions in the event of a release denial where ICE would describe what factors were considered and where the agency would provide the opportunity to submit additional evidence.
- → Bond redetermination for those whose bond had been set so high as to be a bar for release.
- → Implementation of safe release plans, and coordination with established community organizations for those who were released.[206]

In order to balance the liberatory objectives of their movement with serving the immediate and urgent needs of those who were at risk of transfer, the coalition effectively pivoted. They worked to ensure that, even when transfers occurred, the rights and health of those incarcerated would be protected to the greatest extent possible. This was prioritized in the face of intransigent ICE officers, who insisted on speedy transfers with no process. The transfer reforms were necessary to stave off an immediate crisis. This was also a powerful testament to the coalition's commitment to centering the needs of those most impacted, even when it was not always in line with their ultimate vision.[207]

ICE's New Operating Procedures

On March 2, 2022, ICE released new standard operating procedures to consolidate steps the Enforcement and Removal Office (ERO) staff should take amidst the closure of a detention facility, in response to the coalition's demands.[208]

The new operating procedures agreed to provide a timeline for when detained individuals, their attorneys and advocates could submit information for case reviews prior to decisions on transfer versus release. The ERO Field Office also agreed to review the cases of everyone in custody, which theoretically would assist pro se individuals and those lacking ability to assist in their own case review process. ICE stated it would ensure all aggravating and mitigating factors in each case were considered, as described in the then-current enforcement priorities, established by the Mayorkas Memo on September 30, 2021.[209]

ICE agreed to provide the legal practitioners of record and detained individuals ten days to submit requests for release, and a freeze on transfers during that period. Removals, however, would continue along existing policies.[210] ICE agreed to provide a centralized email where requests could be made, but did not state how they would communicate the email address to detainees or attorneys. Additionally, there was no mention of the delivery of decisions, level of detail necessary for denials of release, or additional opportunities to continue providing evidence beyond the formal review process.[211]

In response to the coalition's demands for safe releases, ICE agreed that ERO and facility staff would ensure that all non-citizens are released in accordance with all relevant safe release policies and safeguards. However, there was no mention as to what these policies entailed.[212] Additionally, ICE stated that ERO and facility medical staff would ensure that released and transferred non-citizens will receive all required medication and medical summaries to insure continuity of care as outlined in the detention standards.[213]

In response to the coalition's demands for notification prior to transfer, ICE agreed that ERO will confirm with the facility that transferred non-citizens and their attorneys are aware of when they will have access to counsel in the destination facility (i.e., post-COVID quarantine).[214]

Continued Support & Organizing in the Face of Transfers

Abolish ICE NY-NJ continued showing up and pushing for the release of detained individuals in the face of transfers. Organizers responded swiftly to changes in detainees' status, remaining in contact with the individual if transferred out of the region, and insuring post-transfer support.

Mariama Diallo, an organizer from Borderless Existence Initiative (BEI) and coalition leader, was one of many grassroots advocates involved in advocating and amplifying the demands of detained people in Bergen County before the closure. They maintained contact with the individuals who were detained, addressing their needs, sharing information and resources, and connecting them to stakeholders. Activists, including individuals who were previously detained, made their presence known outside of facilities, holding vigils and using speakers to reach those inside with messages like "Stay strong, we got you."[215]

At the same time, organizers also engaged in civil disobedience, like blocking jails and entrances to DHS's Homeland Security Investigations office—the "last stop before individuals are transferred or deported."[216] As one organizer described:

"This is a movement. Everything pushes us into this direction to become more radical, and really stick up for the core of the community — to put our lives on the line, put our bodies on the line."[217]

- Organizer

During one action, on October 16, 2021, activists protested outside Hudson by chaining themselves to the gates, holding the blockade for more than three hours, and calling on ICE for "releases, not transfers."[218]

"We decided to lock arms. It was powerful in that sense where we came out, [and] put our bodies on the line and laid on the ground for hours...But that won't compare to the amount of work and drive people have on the inside, that have been pushing and trying to survive and have hope for being released."[219]

Tania Mattos, a spokesperson for Abolish ICE NY-NJ who helped to organize the civil disobedience act.

In response to Hudson County's closing announcement, advocates reacted quickly by holding a rally at the jail to demand releases,[220] organizing petitions, [221] and "bombard[ing]" Zoom meetings of the governing board when it voted to extend its ICE contract.[222] They also demanded further support from New Jersey Senators Bob Menendez and Cory Booker, who in turn sent a letter to Acting Director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Tae Johnson, urging release of everyone detained in ICE custody in New Jersey.[223] Those inside the facility staged their own protests, by hunger striking and engaging with the press.[224] Some individuals were released through individual release campaigns, which involved working on a case-by-case basis in order to draft release requests.[225]

Though infrequent, there were several examples of organizing and advocacy efforts for realease that were successful.[226] At Hudson, when only thirty-nine detainees remained at the facility, eight people were released; twenty-four were transferred, and the rest were deported.[227] By October 2021, 20 individuals remained at Bergen, and ICE planned to transfer them more than 350 miles from their families, communities, and attorneys across state lines, to the Buffalo Service Processing Center, in Batavia, New York.[228] Several Bergen detainees, including Carlos, talked about how transfer would impact his ability to receive visits from his partner and one-year-old son—precious time that made him feel "calmer" despite his detention and deportation risk—because they would be unable to travel out of state to see him.[229]

The movement towards closing New Jersey's immigration detention centers and the community support and organizing to address the closure's effects – including devastating and overnight transfers of detained individuals far from their families, communities and counsel– was a lesson in organizing principles, flexibility, and centering of impact.

Chapter V

Lessons Learned and Today's Detention Landscape

Lessons Learned

The coordinated fight against ICE detention, between those on the inside and outside of a facility success of the Abolish ICE coalition underscores the power of a united and coordinated fight against ICE detention. As they reflected on their accomplishments and the challenges they faced, organizers shared the following lessons with hopes of inspiring other communities to action.

Building a Diverse Coalition

Many organizers reflected on the importance of building a diverse coalition that is unified on a common, immovable goal.

> *"I think it's an important lesson on what can be gained working in a coalition, and it's such a huge lesson. I know a lot of the immigrant movement works in coalitions or in campaigns, but it's really kind of important. I think there's a benefit to learning from organizers who have been in these fights for twenty years or twenty-two years. Folks have a range of expertise and backgrounds. You get a lot of historical rooting and knowledge, coupled with really amazing strategies around direct organizing actions."*
>
> Mariama Diallo[230]

> *"[O]ne thing is to make sure that if you are working in a coalition, [is] that the values and principles are very clear on what you want to accomplish. Is it just numbers and some following on social media? Or you really want to push forward an agenda that is an abolitionist one?"*
>
> Haydi Torres[231]

> "Coalition work is not easy, there were times when I almost wanted to quit. I'm doing this work because *I'm someone that went through this immigration detention, so I just want to see that the detention centers are closed,* that's why I'm continuing to be involved. At some point it may feel like you just want to quit, but I think it's good to know why you joined the coalition in the first place."
>
> Uchechukwu Onwa[232]

Abolish ICE Must be Nationwide

The mass transfers of detainees, out of state and across the country, demonstrated that the call to abolish ICE must be national.

"I think that... [the] closing the jails, yes, ultimately can be considered a victory [and] a success, but at the same time, since that led to more people being transferred, that does make it harder for us as like organizers and community members, to build that community and to fight against that system. But I think with the transfers . . . we can turn it into an opportunity to build the network wider and to build solidarity with people across the country."

Thria Bernabe[233]

"One of the gaps that I see, is that we as organizers and as a community can make sure that if they decide to transfer someone to Massachusetts, that we continue to support people in Massachusetts who are fighting against the detention centers there."

Haydi Torres[234]

Holding Space for Each Other

Organizers appreciated the range of feelings and emotions that impacted people were feeling throughout the tumultuous journey towards ICE closures, as they balanced victories at the closing of detention centers against the real-time impacts of subsequent transfers and deportations on immigrants and their families.

"I think that it's really important to hold space for each other . . . for emotions . . . for sadness, rage. I think the way to open the door for organizing and building people's power is to channel . . . that emotion and to help people realize their emotions can be transformed into actionable change."

Thria Bernabe[235]

"I still follow up with the families whose loved ones have been deported to see if they need anything . . . . how can we make sure that you continue to heal and that you also continue to know that there is support? Because I feel like we tend to think that once someone is deported that's it. And we don't see all the consequences that happen, of the trauma."

Haydi Torres[236]

"There was one man that nobody specifically advocated for to be released, and he went on hunger strike in another facility and ended up in a conversation with the ICE field director, and the ICE field director decided to let this person go. So yeah, that's the kind of crazy shit that happens, which is wonderful for that one person, but its awful for everybody else that is stuck there, maybe not realizing how arbitrary the system is, how brutally arbitrary it is."

Kathy O'Leary[237]

An Update on the Current State of Immigration Detention

The 2024 election and local challenges to the 2021 New Jersey anti-detention law have altered the immigration detention landscape since Abolish ICE NY-NJ's successful shuttering of Hudson, Bergen and Essex.

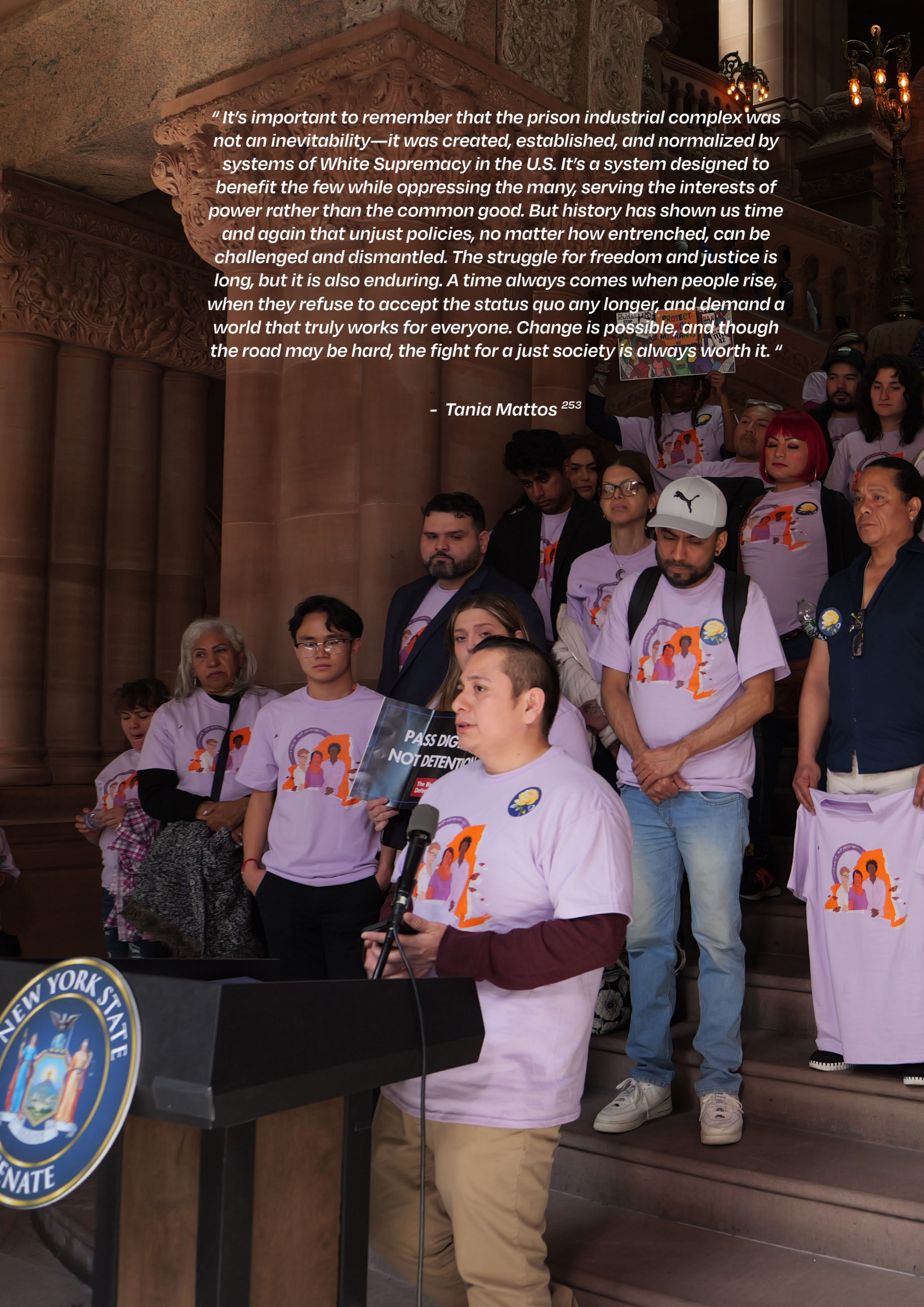
Nationally, the Trump Administration is pursuing its racist anti-immigrant agenda through a massive expansion of the deportation machine, which will require significantly more bed space than the federal government currently has on hand.[238] The administration is said to be expanding immigration detention space across eight states including New York, creating a tent camp in Texas, and considering the use of military prisons.[239]

Locally, anti-detention laws have suffered setbacks from lawsuits by private prison companies. In 2023, a federal judge ruled the anti-detention law was unconstitutional as applied to CoreCivic and permitted the Elizabeth Detention Center to remain open.[240] With the court's blessing, CoreCivic signed a $20 million deal in September 2023 to house immigrants at the facility over the following year.[241] The state of New Jersey appealed the decision, and oral arguments are set to occur before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit the week of April 28, 2025.[242]

During the pendency of the CoreCivic litigation, the New Jersey Attorney General stated it would not enforce the anti-detention law against GEO Group, [243] which has since obtained a lucrative contract with ICE to reopen Delaney Hall.[244] The facility, located in Newark, will hold 1,000 immigrants and is expected to generate $1 billion for GEO Group over the course of its 15 year contract.[245] However, this development has faced legal challenges and opposition from local officials and advocacy groups.[246] In March 2025, the City of Newark filed a complaint against ICE and The GEO Group, alleging that the reopening of Delaney Hall violated local and state building safety protocols.[247] Mayor Ras Baraka emphasized that federal agencies must comply with local laws, and a stop-work order was issued.[248]

Across state lines in New York, county jails including those in Orange, Clinton, and Rensselaer counties, continue to profit from the detention of immigrants.[249] In Batavia, ICE operates the Buffalo Federal Detention Center and houses immigrants from various parts of the country, including those detained near the northern border with Canada. As of April 7, 2025, the Dignity Not Detention (DND) Act is under consideration in the New York State Legislature.[250] The bill, identified as Assembly Bill A4181 and Senate Bill S316, aims to prohibit governmental entities from entering into or renewing contracts to house individuals in immigration detention facilities and mandates the termination of existing contracts.[251] Despite growing advocacy, including recent rallies in Albany, the legislation has not yet advanced to a floor vote.[252]

In the current climate, with the reelection of Donald Trump and the reality of cruel and sweeping immigration enforcement, community organizing toward abolition becomes even more essential. Across the country, activists are continuing to challenge the detention-industrial complex and advocate for alternatives to detention. The closure of detention centers, like the victories seen in New Jersey, stands as a testament to the strength of grassroots organizing. While the fight is far from over, each step forward is a reminder that the struggle for abolition remains steadfast. History has shown time and again that oppressive systems are not dismantled by acceptance but by resistance, and the fight for abolition will thrive in the face of adversity.



" It's important to remember that the prison industrial complex was not an inevitability—it was created, established, and normalized by systems of White Supremacy in the U.S. It's a system designed to benefit the few while oppressing the many, serving the interests of power rather than the common good. But history has shown us time and again that unjust policies, no matter how entrenched, can be challenged and dismantled. The struggle for freedom and justice is long, but it is also enduring. A time always comes when people rise, when they refuse to accept the status quo any longer, and demand a world that truly works for everyone. Change is possible, and though the road may be hard, the fight for a just society is always worth it. "

- Tania Mattos [253]

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