



## **FREEDOM FOR IMMIGRANTS**

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Office of Partnership and Engagement  
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

July 14, 2021

Dear Secretary Mayorkas, Acting Ombudsman Gersten, Acting Director Johnson, and Acting Assistant Director Thurlow:

The 23 undersigned community-based detention visitation groups write to request the immediate reinstatement of on-site visitation at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities.

On March 13, 2020, ICE “temporarily” suspended social visitation in all of its detention facilities in response to the escalating COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The “Visitation” section in the “Frequently Asked Questions” of the “ICE Guidance on COVID-19” webpage has not been updated since April 2, 2020, at which point ICE stated that “ICE recognizes the considerable

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<sup>1</sup> Montoya-Galvez, Camilo. “ICE suspends family visits in detention centers amid coronavirus concerns.” March 13, 2020. *CBS News*.  
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ice-bans-family-visits-in-detention-centers-amid-coronavirus-concerns>

impact of suspending personal visitation and... will continue to collaborate with the CDC, IHSC, and its network of health care providers to provide updates and revise procedures as necessary.”<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) “Interim Guidance on Management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Correctional and Detention Facilities”, was most recently updated on June 9, 2021 to state the following: “As community transmission levels decline, COVID-19 vaccines become more widely available, and new guidance for the general population is introduced, correctional and detention facilities may consider when to modify facility-level COVID-19 prevention measures. These measures might include... visitation restrictions.”<sup>3</sup>

Under the section “Prevention Practices for Visitors”, the CDC goes on to outline “strategies to limit transmission from visitors,” such as providing “alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol in visitor entrances, exits, and waiting areas” and providing “visitors and volunteers with information.” The CDC emphasizes that “suspending visitation should only be done in the interest of incarcerated/detained persons’ physical health and the health of the general public. Visitation is important to maintain mental health.” ICE’s 2011 Performance-Based National Detention Standards also stress the importance of visitation by family, friends, and others in the community to maintain morale and ties.<sup>4</sup>

On September 30, 2020, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) announced that social visitation would be reinstated in the 100+ facilities in the BOP system on October 3, 2020.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, over nine months later, ICE has still not indicated when visitation will be reinstated in the 200+ ICE detention facilities.

We ask you to read the following testimonies from people previously held in ICE detention about the urgent importance of reinstating visitation:

1. *"I'm ready to participate in the fight for the return of detention visitation. I spent 8 months at the detention center and was suffering seriously from anxiety, depression and high blood pressure, because I didn't have a lawyer; I couldn't speak to my family, and worst of all, I lacked encouragement. From the day of my first visit, I felt relief, knowing that there are people that care about me. I was able to communicate with my family and*

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement. “ICE Guidance on COVID-19.” Updated June 17, 2021.

<https://www.ice.gov/coronavirus>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Interim Guidance on Management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Correctional and Detention Facilities.” Updated June 9, 2021.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/correction-detention/guidance-correctional-detention.html>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement. Performance-Based National Detention Standards 2011. “Visitation.”

<https://www.ice.gov/doclib/detention-standards/2011/5-7.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons. “Bureau to Resume Social Visitation.” September 30, 2020.

[https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20200902\\_visitation.jsp](https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20200902_visitation.jsp)

*got photos from my family through visitation; I was also able to get a lawyer. I can say I'm a free man here today because of the visitors."*

- **Selky**, previously detained at Denver Contract Detention Facility in Aurora, Colorado

2. *"I had been in the detention for 2 and half years. I was just released a few weeks ago. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, everyone now understands the importance of person-to-person connection. In the detention facility, detained individuals are already isolated from others, especially their loved ones. Visitation is through the glass so it would be impossible for any transmission to take place. The visiting areas also are sanitized by staff. Plus, most detained individuals are vaccinated. We need to see our loved ones. It's very important to continue that connection, even just through the glass. I and my family are requesting that ICE and the GEO Group, Inc. consider the necessity of the humanity to connect with one another and reinstate the visits."*

- **Tien**, previously detained at Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington

3. *"I am writing to ask you to allow the reinstatement of visitation. I was detained for 21 months in the Eloy Detention Center. For me, visitation was a tremendous moral and spiritual support, especially for those who do not have family in this country, such as myself. Visitation made detention more tolerable. Knowing that someone took the time to visit and listen to us for a bit calmed anxiety and depression and gave us much comfort, hope, and joy. Because of this, I will be so bold as to ask you to consider this request."*

- **Lucero**, previously detained at Eloy Detention Center in Eloy, Arizona

4. *"I support in-person visits. Although a friend of mine put money in my account so I could have a video visit with my wife, mom, sister and children, it cannot be a replacement for an in-person visit. On April 22nd of this year, I was married in the detention center that I am in. Through constant bugging of myself, my wife and lawyer; the Head of Security at my detention center made it happen. Even though no contact was allowed between us in the room where the ceremony was held, at least we were in the same room together for the ceremony. We were able to talk with each other for 30 minutes after the ceremony. I so wanted to hug and kiss my wife but could not. It was a very emotional moment for both of us. We felt so blessed to have each other in our lives and felt that one day we will be able to be together. That moment could not be felt if the ceremony was done by video rather than in-person."*

- **Miguel**, previously detained at Torrance County Detention Facility in Estancia, New Mexico

5. *"Having visits helped in the sense that it's something to look forward to. When you're detained, it can be very depressing, especially for someone who doesn't have family or friends to come and visit. For me it was a bit different, I had a lot of support of video visits with family and friends who lived out-of-state. Still, having community members*

*come visit gave me something to look forward to. It gave me a routine and it's very important to have that during time in detention. The people who visited me and became my friends would ask if they could send me books. We would talk about outside, the weather in Colorado, different things, and that hour went by really quickly. When it was finished, we'd end the conversations in the middle, so I got to look forward to picking up the conversation the next week. In that sense it helped a lot. A lot of people have misconceptions about people in this country. For some of the immigrants detained with me, they had never had any interaction with an 'American.' For them, it was something exciting, to be able to learn about American culture and make friends in a different country. To them, even though the visits were through glass, it still meant a lot, like 'Oh, I got to see somebody!' The biggest help that the visits did was that they help get your mind off of the negative things that are surrounding you and give you something to look forward to."*

- **Jimmy**, previously detained at Denver Contract Detention Facility in Aurora, Colorado

6. *"I am so thankful for the visits I had when I was detained in Tacoma for at least 14 months. I had no one here, no family members, no friends. Visitation was so important for me. I had paid an attorney who didn't help me. When I started to receive visits, the visitors connected me to a volunteer attorney, made arrangements to deposit money to my phone account, and sent me materials to learn English. That was a turning point for me, when they started helping me. It was the only hope for me, without any means, knowing that someone is here who is giving me help."*

- **Ali**, previously detained at Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington

7. *"I respectfully write to inform you how important it is for me and for each one of us that we had the opportunity to receive visitors in the detention center. I was detained for 22 months and visitation offered both emotional and spiritual support. I urgently implore you to allow this beautiful and humane activity to resume, as it is critical for each person in that place."*

- **Gemina**, previously detained at Eloy Detention Center in Eloy, Arizona

8. *"Visitation played a very special mental role in my life in detention. As an example, I myself did not have friends nor family here in the state. I was frustrated and slowly dying, which no one understood. When I started having visitors, it brought joy into my heart despite the fact that I was in prison. Sincerely, if not for the visitors and their undying love, I could have been a dead man by now, because ICE was already prepared to deport me back to Cameroon. Furthermore, they sent me donations and connected me with one of the best lawyers who rescued me from the hands of the ICE. I will never forget how amazing they are; me being alive today is due to them. I am praying every day for God to bless them so they are able to visit people like myself who do not have friends or family that can help."*

- **Martin**, previously detained at Denver Contract Detention Facility in Aurora, Colorado

In solidarity with Selky, Tien, Lucero, Miguel, Jimmy, Ali, Gemina, and Martin, as well as the over 27,000 individuals currently caged in ICE detention and their loved ones, we urge you to reinstate visitation in ICE detention facilities immediately. As part of the growing nationwide movement to end immigration detention, we remain outraged by the fact that the number of individuals caged in ICE detention has doubled since President Biden and Vice President Harris entered into office.

We ask that you inform us by August 4 of the date on which visitation will be reinstated. We look forward to your response. If you have any questions, please contact Rebecca Merton, Director of Visitation and Independent Monitoring at Freedom for Immigrants at [rmerton@freedomforimmigrants.org](mailto:rmerton@freedomforimmigrants.org) or (510) 806-1330.

Sincerely,

Freedom for Immigrants (*Nationwide*)  
Adelanto Visitation & Advocacy Network (*California*)  
AIDNW (*Washington*)  
Baker Interfaith Friends (*Florida*)  
Casa de Paz (*Colorado*)  
Casa Mariposa Detention Visitation Program (*Arizona*)  
Community Asylum Seekers Project (*Vermont*)  
Desert Support for Asylum Seekers (*California*)  
El Refugio (*Georgia*)  
Etowah Visitation Project (*Alabama*)  
Faithful Friends/Amigos Fieles (*California*)  
Immigrant Action Alliance (*Florida*)  
Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants (*Illinois*)  
Iowans for Immigrant Freedom (*Iowa*)  
Kern Welcoming and Extending Solidarity to Immigrants (*California*)  
Louisiana Advocates for Immigrants in Detention (*Louisiana*)  
New Hampshire Immigrant Visitation Program (*New Hampshire*)  
Rainbow Beginnings (*California*)  
Refugee Support Network (*Texas*)  
Shalom Mennonite Church/Indiana Aid to Incarcerated Immigrants (*Indiana*)  
Transcend Arizona (*Arizona*)  
Voces Unidas (*Texas*)  
Volunteers for Immigrants in Detention - Albuquerque (*New Mexico*)

CC:

Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security  
Senator Christopher Murphy (CT), Chair

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security  
Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard (CA), Chair

Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
Senator Gary C. Peters (MI), Chair

House Committee on Homeland Security  
Representative Bennie Thompson (MS), Chair