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ICE detainees go on hunger strike in N.J amid coronavirus fears, lawyers say

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By [Joe Atmonavage | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

Immigrants detained in the Essex County Correctional Facility have organized a hunger strike in response to growing concerns about a [coronavirus](#) outbreak in the jail, a group of immigration attorneys said Wednesday.

In a statement released by New York City public defenders, the conditions at the Essex correctional facility “have deteriorated to such an extent” that an entire unit has launched a hunger strike and is demanding Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials release them.

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“The hunger strike just underlines how deeply problematic ICE’s management of the situation is,” the joint statement said. “We are in the midst of an unprecedented

... ICE ...

crisis. ICE has done nothing to rise to the occasion but instead continues to put the lives of hundreds of people at risk.”

The statement says that attorneys from the Legal Aid Society, Brooklyn Defender Services and the Bronx Defenders, who often represent detainees in N.J., are hearing from detained immigrants in N.J. jails that they are being subjected to dangerous conditions, "putting them at further risk of contracting and spreading the COVID-19 virus."

The public defender offices said they received a statement from a group of individuals incarcerated at the Essex County facility. The statement said that the point of the hunger strike was to petition for release, either on bond, bracelet monitoring or for those with final deportation orders who want to be deported, "get them on their plane ASAP.”

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“This coronavirus is getting out of control and if we were to be infected I am sure everyone would rather die on the outside with our families than in here,” the statement from the detainees said.

ICE detains around 2,000 immigrants in New Jersey in total between their private detention center in Elizabeth and the three county jails (Bergen, Essex and Hudson County) it has contracts with.

ICE officials and the warden at the Essex County Correctional Facility did not immediately return a request for comment regarding the hunger strike.

Coronavirus cases as of Wednesday, March 18

LOCATION	CASES	DEATHS
New Jersey	427	5
New York State	2,382	3
New York City	1,339	2
Pennsylvania	133	1
Philadelphia	34	0
United States	7,320	115
Worldwide	214,000	8,727

Note: U.S. data includes confirmed and presumptive positive cases of COVID-19 reported to CDC or tested at CDC since Jan. 21, plus cases reported by state health officials. Updated: March 18 at 5:15 p.m.

Table: Len Melisurgo • Source: CDC, WHO, Johns Hopkins Univ., State Health Depts. in NJ, NY and PA • [Get the data](#)
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The public defender law offices have also been in contact with immigration detainees at the Hudson County and Bergen County jails, where ICE also detains immigrants awaiting immigration proceedings.

At the Hudson County jail, multiple people have reported that they have not been given soap and are living in unsanitary conditions, the attorneys say. Others have said jail officials are keeping them in their cells for prolonged periods of time, including up to 24 hours straight in hopes of preventing an outbreak.

Another detainee said there was no way to call for medical attention, and that jail staff was instead asking if inmates had complaints, noting down the answer, and “then doing nothing whatsoever in response,” according to the law offices

In Bergen County, the wife of a detainee said a group of 30 inmates was moved into solitary confinement “until the coronavirus is under control.”

“We have been calling on ICE and the wardens of the local jails to ensure that they are implementing appropriate safety and preventive measures to protect our clients and all currently-detained people from COVID-19,” the joint statement said. “They

have failed to provide any guidance on these measures or to heed our requests to release all people from ICE custody, including vulnerable people who are particularly susceptible to infection.”

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There is increasing pressure from immigration advocacy groups and immigration attorneys for ICE to release all immigration detainees, as experts warn that an outbreak in a correctional facility could devastate a population that lives in tight and often unsanitary conditions.

A federal report conducted last year of four immigration facilities around the country — including the Essex County Correctional Facility in Newark — found a number of “egregious violations of detention standards” at the facilities, including rotting food, decrepit bathrooms and a lack of outdoor space, according to the federal report.

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Make the Road New Jersey, an immigration rights organization, demanded over the weekend that ICE release all detainees in New Jersey. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) New Jersey has also called on ICE to release immigration detainees.

“Detention is inhumane and unsafe, and ICE is ill-equipped to provide adequate care and ensure the safety of detainees,” Deya Aldana, of Make the Road New Jersey, said in a statement. “Detainees must be released for their safety.”

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