

First ICE officer tests positive for COVID-19

Immigrants in US detention facilities plead for help as coronavirus pandemic spreads

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As the global COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, hundreds of immigrant detention centers holding over 55,000 people are at high risk for becoming epicenters of the disease.

Immigrant detention centers are infamous for their horrific conditions, lack of medical care, and the extremely close quarters—creating excellent conditions for the coronavirus to spread rapidly if even a single person catches the disease.

On Thursday night the first ICE officer at a New Jersey detention facility tested positive for COVID-19, meaning that it is likely that the virus has already taken hold in detention facilities across the country, putting thousands of lives at immediate risk.

The immigrant advocacy group, RAICES, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, has been working with immigrants in detention centers across the US, advocating for their release in the face of this pandemic.

Representatives of RAICES shared five harrowing statements from immigrants currently being held in Karnes Detention Center with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

One 40-year-old detainee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo described the situation facing him, his wife and their nine-year-old son.

“Here in detention the situation is not good, especially as we hear about the spread of the virus outside of these walls. We can see on the news that the virus is spreading and that there is a serious risk,” he noted.

“Here at this detention center, we do not have access to hand sanitizer or masks, or anything else that could protect as we are all stuck together in close quarters. The officials here have not said anything to us about what is happening outside, or any extra precautions that we should take.”

In an online press conference held by RAICES on Wednesday, the wife of a detained immigrant reported that the detention facility’s staff have been given masks and hand sanitizer while the immigrants are given nothing.

The Congolese detainee’s statement continues: “We are scared because nobody will tell us anything, and we fear that nobody will take care of us. We are scared because we don’t know how to protect ourselves, nobody will share anything

with us. I fear that many people could die without the proper healthcare. If we were released, we would be able to live with family and friends and help slow the spread of the virus.”

Another detainee born in Haiti who is currently detained in ICE custody at the Karnes Detention Center with his pregnant wife and their one-year-old son also spoke to RAICES.

“I am not too comfortable here. Most of the people here are women and children, many of whom are already sick or not eating well. We are all worried that if the virus reaches this detention center, many people could die. The GEO officials have not said anything to us or shared important information about safety. Everything that we know has come from the news that we watch. The officials have been silent.”

Over 60 percent of people are held in privately-run immigrant prisons. GEO Group and Corrections Corporation of America/CoreCivic together detain approximately 15,000 people in immigration detention per day.

“I believe that if my family was able to be released and continue my case outside of detention, we would have a better chance of staying healthy,” the Congolese detainee said.

“The doctors here are already not able to protect us. The doctors say they are already busy and they are frequently unable to take care of our current needs. My wife, for example, is sick and has ovarian cysts. She is in lots of pain and has gone to the doctors here many times but has been told treatment is not available. She has not had her period in over five months. If this is how this center handles routine medical care, I fear for our lives if the virus reaches us and we are stuck here.”

Another man from Haiti who is being detained with his wife and their twin babies, both born in Chile, wrote in shocking detail about the subhuman conditions which prevail at the Karnes detention center:

“I have been detained in Karnes since February 24, 2020. I am desperate for my family to be freed. Conditions in Karnes are very bad. This place is hell.

“The food here in Karnes is very bad. I cannot eat, being here. The children are not eating. The food is not the type of food the children are used to eating. The food is not prepared properly. The children cannot get the type of food they want to

eat here.

“The officers here force us to eat. They tell us that if we do not go to eat they will lock us up in our rooms. I went to eat with one of the children one time and my wife stayed behind with the other child napping. At the dining hall, an older officer, a large woman with gray hair, stopped me from coming in. She told me, ‘you need to bring your wife to eat. If she does not come, she will be locked in one of the medical rooms.’

“We are forced to go to the cafeteria. And if we do not eat all the food while in the cafeteria for mealtime, we have to throw away the food. Many times my wife and I have tried to bring bread with us out of the cafeteria for the children, but the officers do not let us. It is frustrating to have no control over what my family and I can eat.

“So little of the food here is edible. A Haitian father I know found a worm in the food. He told the officers, and the officers took the worm from him and insisted that he put it in the food himself.

“My babies have had diarrhea since we arrived here in Karnes, for about twenty-two days. This is very scary as a parent, especially with children so little. They get diarrhea from the milk they are drinking here in Karnes and from the water. I have complained to the medical officers but they say that it is fine. They say it is normal because it is the first time the children are drinking this type of milk. I asked for different milk but the officers said special milk for little ones is only for children under one.

“Like the milk, the water in Karnes is also not drinkable. It gives my children diarrhea. Even grown people get diarrhea from the water, my wife included. I have asked the officers about this too, but the officers just tell us to drink the water or buy water from the commissary.

“I go entire days without drinking water when I cannot afford to buy it from the commissary because drinking the Karnes water makes me feel so sick. Water is \$1.50 for a small bottle. I can only earn up to \$3.00 a day here in Karnes, so on days when I do not have enough money I have to go thirsty. What water I can get I have to give to the children first.

“My wife and I have not been eating properly, hydrating properly, and we cannot sleep at night. I have two children with me so I am not sleeping. My children are barely two years old and the officers will not give us a crib for the babies to sleep in.

“The officers say they must sleep in the adult beds. Another family gave me their crib, so now one of the babies can sleep in there. But my wife and I do not sleep well because we have to make sure the baby does not fall off of the bed. We have to watch the children all night long. And all night long the officers are knocking on the door, opening the door to check on us. It is a nightmare.

“There is no medical care here in Karnes. My wife has cysts in her stomach. Prior to being detained here a doctor told her she needs to have surgery to remove them, that she has waste in an organ. Over two weeks ago, she received a sonogram here in

Karnes but has not been told anything about it. She has not received any treatment other than some medication to help her go to the bathroom. When we go to the medical center here in Karnes the officers just tell us ‘you’re fine.’

“At one point, my wife took one of the babies to the medical center for a rash. The rash was so bad that one of the medical officers said we needed to see a doctor. My wife made a follow-up appointment to meet with the doctor. There is only one doctor here in Karnes from what I have seen. When she came to the appointment the doctor told her ‘I’m sorry, just continue using the cream’ even though the medical staff had already told us the rash required more treatment.

“My babies had to celebrate their second birthday in this jail. It makes me very sad. We are separated all the time here in Karnes. When I go to see the kids they cry.

“I have been watching the news about the coronavirus. I am very afraid to be detained with something like this going on. We do not get good healthcare here in Karnes. With all of these people in one place, we all get sick at the same time. This thing is very sensitive, and sickness spreads fast in Karnes. We will all die in here. If it comes here, we are doomed. Lack of medical care will kill us.

“If we were free, we could go to the hospital. If we were free, we would not risk contaminating each other. If we were free, we could be with our families in this difficult time and we could get proper medical care. It would be good for the community to free us so we do not spread contamination.”

His statement concluded: “This place is difficult enough for an adult to survive. This is no place for children. Please free our family, the families here in Karnes, and everyone living in this situation of imprisonment.”



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