

First immigrant in ICE custody tests positive for coronavirus in New Jersey

Erik Schreiber
26 March 2020

A Mexican-born man held at Bergen County Jail in Hackensack, New Jersey, has become the first person in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to test positive for COVID-19. The man, who is 31 years old, has been isolated and is receiving medical care, according to ICE. Bergen County and ICE have suspended the intake of federal immigration detainees at the jail. In addition, staff have opened an isolation unit for other detainees who become sick.

The still-unidentified detainee had been brought to Bergen County Jail during the third week in February, according to Sheriff Anthony Cureton. Because most people who are exposed to coronavirus develop symptoms within 14 days, the detainee likely was infected after his arrival at the jail.

Less than a week before the detainee showed symptoms and underwent testing, a corrections officer at the facility had tested positive for coronavirus. The Bergen County sheriff's office said at the time that no detainees had been exposed, yet 15 detainees and several other officers were later quarantined. It is a near certainty that other detainees at Bergen County Jail have been infected with coronavirus.

In addition to this, a medical employee at Elizabeth Detention Center in Elizabeth, New Jersey as well as two officers at the Essex County Correctional Facility in Newark, and two inmates who are being held on criminal charges at the Hudson County Detention Center in Kearny have all tested positive, authorities said.

Two detainees at the jail, under condition of anonymity, told northjersey.com that they were worried that the virus could spread. They reported that several detainees had been coughing and complaining of headaches and fevers.

ICE is currently holding approximately 37,000

immigrants at numerous detention centers across the country. In New Jersey, about 1,200 immigrant workers are being detained at three county jails and one private facility. All of the New Jersey jails have now reported a coronavirus case among guards or detainees.

Immigrant advocates, doctors, and civil rights groups had warned that a coronavirus outbreak at a prison would be inevitable unless crowding and unsanitary conditions were addressed. "This is what public health experts have assured us would happen: People in detention centers are sitting ducks for the spread of this virus," Andrea Flores, a deputy director of policy at the American Civil Liberties Union, said in a statement. "The same experts have also predicted that once outbreaks in detention centers begin, they will spread rapidly. The suffering and death that will occur is unnecessary and preventable. ICE must take immediate and drastic steps to reduce the number of people in detention. If it doesn't, it will be to blame for a humanitarian crisis."

Several days before the detainee tested positive for coronavirus, two doctors at the US Department of Homeland Security had issued a letter urging Congress to consider releasing all immigrant detainees who do not pose a threat to public safety. The doctors were "gravely concerned" about the consequences of a coronavirus outbreak among ICE detainees, according to their letter.

That ICE endangers detainees' health is a matter of public record. Last week, immigrants detained by ICE at Essex County Correctional Facility, New Jersey, began a hunger strike to protest their lack of basic sanitation and to demand their immediate release. In June 2019, Bergen County Jail was the site of a mumps outbreak. In 2017, surprise federal inspections of several jails holding ICE detainees found that detainees

with painful conditions, such as knee injuries and infected teeth, waited for days to receive medical care.

The Trump administration has allowed conditions at ICE facilities to deteriorate to a shocking extent. The 2017 inspections, which were conducted by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General, found bathrooms with mold, mildew, and peeling. Some bathrooms had no hot water, and some showers had no cold water. Inspectors found leaks in many units that housed detainees, some which dripped onto detainees' beds. The fact that ICE inspects these facilities weekly indicates that it is maintaining these filthy conditions deliberately.

On Sunday, people in over 100 cars organized by the immigrant rights group Never Again Action protested at the Hudson County Detention Center, which detains 280 undocumented immigrants apprehended by ICE, and 650 other detainees. Drivers honked their car horns and bore signs that said, "Free them all" and "Release them now."

On Tuesday, an anonymous source told the media that the Elizabeth Detention Center and the Essex County Correctional Facility would release some inmates because of the coronavirus pandemic, although no information was given on how many people would be released.

The release of these detainees is likely too few and too late, and thousands of undocumented workers remain behind bars in New Jersey and across the United States as the deadly coronavirus pandemic spreads.

The confirmation of COVID-19 infections in New Jersey at ICE jails, as well as the filthy conditions that prevail, shows the criminal indifference not only of the Trump administration but of the state government run by the millionaire Democratic governor Phil Murphy as well as both parties in the state legislature, towards the health of prisoners or the public at large. As one ICE detainee told *Gothamist*, "We're sitting here like ducks, like mice, we don't know what's going on. They're killing us, man."



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)