

# Nenko Gantchev died in Michigan ICE detention facility amid Democratic Party “oversight”

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The year 2025 tied the record for the number of deaths of individuals detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) since the agency was founded in 2003. In both 2004 and 2025, there were 32 deaths reported. Now, 2026 is on pace to surpass this record, with 7 deaths in ICE custody in the first two months of the year.

In December 2025, as reported by the WSWs, four immigrants died in four days in ICE private prisons. One of these immigrants was Nenko Stanev Gantchev.

The life of Nenko Gantchev exposes the lies about who is being targeted by the Trump administration’s increasingly expansive mass deportation apparatus. His death on December 15 at the ICE North Lake Processing Center (NLPC) in Baldwin, Michigan exposes the criminal abuse detainees are subjected to, as well as the real nature of Democratic Party “oversight.”

The death notice published December 18 by ICE lied about Gantchev, calling him a “criminal illegal alien.” This is contradicted by the rest of the notice, which lists several times that Gantchev was arrested, but stated that the charges were disposed of every time. It also excluded the fact that Gantchev was married to a US citizen and had a pending application for a green card. Despite ICE stating “the official cause of death is still under investigation,” over two months later no further information has been released.

The arrest of Gantchev in Chicago on September 23 was a part of “Operation Midway Blitz,” announced by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) September 8.

“This operation will target the worst of the worst criminal illegal aliens in Chicago,” said Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin. She claimed Governor Pritzker and his “fellow sanctuary politicians” had released Tren de Aragua gang members, rapists, kidnappers, and drug traffickers on Chicago’s streets and making the city “a magnet for criminals.” McLaughlin quoted the often-repeated words of President Trump and DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, that “no city is a safe haven for criminal illegal aliens.”

## Family and friends of Gantchev speak out

In statements to ABC7, the wife and friends of Nenko Gantchev describe a man that in no way fits McLaughlin’s description. “I think it’s a big mess,” said Vanya, a friend and former coworker. “Everyone knows he’s a good person and hard worker,” she said.

“He was just a wonderful human being, very, very docile, very good natured, funny, you know, just very helpful, the kind that would stick up

for his friends,” said a family friend identified as Anna, who added, “If you needed something, he would be there for you.”

“He had real estate here. He had a business here. He was here a very long time,” said Anna. “He wanted very much to be an American citizen. He was married to an American citizen.”

Gantchev came to Chicago from Bulgaria 30 years ago on a student visa. He remained in the country on a work permit and worked for a trucking company that he owned since 2008. In 2017 he married an American citizen and was in the process of applying for a green card.

“We had a very good life together, this is very hard for me,” Gantchev’s wife said, who was informed of his death on what would have been their eighth wedding anniversary.

“I want people to know what happened to him, a man who lived 30 years here, hardworking, paid taxes, and they treated him like an animal,” said Gantchev’s wife. “They are so rude to him... They treated him like he was a murderer.”

Gantchev was detained on September 23, 2025, at the USCIS Chicago office when he appeared for an interview related to his application for a green card. Gantchev was transported 250 miles away to be held at NLPC in Michigan.

In November, a federal judge in Chicago ordered the release of Gantchev, and hundreds of others, on bond. Federal officials indicated in court records that his release was not considered a high risk to public safety. The ruling was overturned on appeal, leaving him with a choice to either self deport to Bulgaria or hope to receive bond at some future point.

“I told him, ‘You have to make the decision, but please don’t leave me alone here,’” Gantchev’s wife said. “He’s paid taxes this whole time, he’s not a criminal. Why do they treat him like this?”

The 56-year-old Gantchev had a history of hypertension and diabetes, and his family alleges he was provided with inadequate medical care.

“There was no accommodation for his [type 2] diabetes, the fact that he needed any kind of special diet,” said Anna, speaking on behalf of the family. “He was not feeling well, progressively.”

North Lake staff “told him he needed an echocardiogram, at least a month went by up to the point that he died, that he did not get that,” Anna said. “It never happened.”

At 9:15 p.m. on December 15, the Lake County dispatch received a call on the non-emergency line from an officer at NLPC who stated, “I have a detainee that is unresponsive, late 50s male. They’re doing chest compressions, as we speak, performing CPR.”

Emergency Medical Services responded to the facility and by 10:08 p.m. a medical examiner was called out after Gantchev had been pronounced deceased.

According to the family’s attorney, as of early January they had not received the autopsy and were seeking to obtain a second, independently

conducted autopsy.

## Democratic Party “oversight”

Ten days prior to Nenko’s death, Democratic Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib of Detroit toured NLPC. Tlaib is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Her stated reason for the visit was to respond to many complaints about the conditions in the facility including frigid temperatures, inadequate food, unsanitary facilities, difficulty accessing attorneys and problems obtaining medical care.

In a video posted to social media she stated, “during this visit we learned that there have been multiple suicide attempts at the facility, including one in the last couple weeks, and heard that more medical staff are needed.” Tlaib has called for closing “inhumane” ICE facilities but has not focused on NLPC or returned there since.

On February 17, Democratic Congresswomen Haley Stevens of Birmingham and Hillary Scholten of Grand Rapids toured NLPC and held a press conference afterwards.

They had sent a letter December 23 addressed to Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kristi Noem and the Acting Director of Ice Todd Lyons. In the letter they called for an investigation and asked questions regarding the circumstances surrounding Gantchev’s death and the conditions at NLPC.

They asked Noem and Lyons to “Please respond no later than Friday, January 9th, 2026.” They also stated, “We all believe in a secure border, but securing our border does not require abandoning our commitment to the rule of law and protecting and honoring human dignity.” No response has been provided.

The February 17 tour of NLPC by Scholten and Stevens was pre-planned, allowing DHS officials to carefully stage-manage it. Over 100 detainees signed up to speak to congresswomen, but only four were allowed to do so, and only with staff from the facility present during conversations. Of the individuals allowed to meet, several spoke languages for which interpreters were not provided.

Scholten, clearly taken in by the tour and effectively disregarding complaints from attorneys and detainees, said, “I will say, I was impressed that they have both health and dental screening there to make sure that individuals, you know, are not presenting a health risk to the overall population and that they will be, you know, attending to their health needs while they are there.”

Stevens stated, “The clothing that they are provided was not made in America. I was able to check the labels on that.”

In a display of complicity, Stevens noted the presence of female command officers at the detention camp, stating, “There’s female leadership and there are women who walked with us today and explained the intake process, how important it is to treat people with humanity. And that, obviously, really stuck out to me.”

A reporter pushed back on Stevens’ comments: “I know they said that treating inmates with respect is something that they discussed with you. We’ve heard from a lot of people with loved ones here that that’s not the case. Guards turning badges around so they can’t identify them, phone calls being cut when people do discuss conditions here. Did you guys press on that at all?”

Scholten responded, “We did, especially when we spoke to a gentleman who was clearly very nervous about telling us about the conditions. He said I hope that this isn’t used as retribution against me and I get sent back to the hole because I really want to speak honestly with you. We did ask for an opportunity to speak with him alone and in private and we were denied that opportunity.”

## The largest detention facility in the Midwest

The NLPC is the largest detention facility in the Midwest, with a capacity of 1,800 beds. Data from ICE in 2026 shows an average daily population around 1,400, which puts it in the top ten highest detainee population nationwide. Data indicates roughly 90 percent of detainees have no criminal record.

When built by Wackenhut Corrections Corporation in 1998, the NLPC was called “punk prison.” It was the first private prison in Michigan and was built to house juveniles for the Michigan Department of Corrections. Wackenhut was renamed GEO Group Inc in 2003.

GEO Group is a publicly traded, for profit corporation that operates facilities in the US, United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia. Its annual revenue has grown continuously from \$2.17 billion in 2016 to \$2.63 billion in 2025. On a November 2024 earnings call after the election of Trump, CEO Brian Evans estimated that his company could make as much as \$400 million annually by filling empty or underutilized beds at existing detention facilities to support what he called the “future needs for ICE and the federal government.”

GEO Group has been criticized for unsafe and inhumane conditions across the country repeatedly. Lawsuits have alleged sexual abuse, harassment, forced labor, retaliation and denial of medical care. NLPC specifically has a long history of mistreatment. Soon after it opened, parents of teenaged boys who had been tried and convicted as adults alleged that their children had suffered physical, mental, and sexual abuse at the maximum-security prison. In 2020 there were six hunger strikes demanding medical care, improved food, and the end of discriminatory use of solitary confinement.

NLPC closed and reopened numerous times, transitioning to housing out-of-state inmates until 2017 and then sentenced criminal immigrants until 2022. In June 2025, NLPC reopened under a contract valued at \$87 million annually with ICE.

Lake County, where NLPC is located, has consistently been the poorest in Michigan with 20.5 percent below the poverty line in 2024. GEO Group has been the largest employer and taxpayer in the county. Michigan Works!, an agency of the Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, helped GEO Group recruit 500 employees.

The reopening of NLPC led to multiple protests with hundreds of participants, both in Baldwin and in the nearest major city, Grand Rapids. These have been coordinated by No Detention Centers in Michigan, a coalition advocating for immigrants detained around the state.

“People here are angry and they are concerned for the safety of our immigrant neighbors and friends and loved ones,” JR Martin with No Detention Centers in Michigan told News 8 at an April 17, 2025, protest in Grand Rapids. “We know that the reopening of the north lake prison in Baldwin as an ICE detention center would mean an increase in targeting of immigrants in our region, increased violence against them, increased threats against them and we want to resist that.”

The detention of Gantchev, a beloved long-time resident and business owner who was in the process of applying for a green card, exposes the lies of the Trump administration about who it is targeting. This lie points to the likelihood that the mass detention apparatus being constructed will be turned against American citizens. As the WWSWS has explained, the widespread opposition that exists must find expression in the independent mobilization of the working class against capitalism and not making appeals to Democratic Party politicians.



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