

Haitian asylum seeker found dead in Pittsburgh after ICE detention

“You just can’t be dumping these people on the streets like this”—Joseph Murphy, Michel family attorney

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Daphy Michel, a 31-year-old Haitian asylum seeker with documented mental illness, was found dead in a Pittsburgh bus shelter on March 2—still wearing the ankle monitor that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had fitted on her five days earlier, when it released her alone into an unfamiliar city in freezing weather, more than 40 miles from her home, without notifying her family or her attorney.

Michel entered the United States through a legal port of entry in Brownsville, Texas, on December 14, 2022, paroled in under a discretionary authorization for urgent humanitarian reasons. She subsequently filed for asylum. At the time of her death, an immigration hearing was scheduled for April 16 in Orlando, Florida—her case was still pending. Her brother Carlo, who had been waiting for her release, lives legally in the area under Temporary Protected Status (TPS)—the same status the Trump administration has repeatedly sought to terminate for Haitian immigrants.

Michel had been living in Charleroi, Pennsylvania—a former industrial town of coal miners and steelworkers on the Monongahela River, 40 miles south of Pittsburgh. Its deindustrialized landscape and gutted social services would prove part of the trap she could not escape.

On September 3, 2025, she was arrested after a neighbor called 911 to report that Michel was experiencing a mental health crisis. Charleroi police, who had prior contact with her and knew her history, arrested her on misdemeanor charges of harassment and terroristic threats. As is typical in the United States, instead of dispatching emergency mental health services, police were sent. She was taken to Washington County Jail and held on a \$10,000 bond, waiting nearly six months for a hearing—including waiting for a mental health evaluation that reportedly never fully materialized.

When Michel finally appeared in court on February 26, the judge dismissed both misdemeanor counts, saying there was no victim. But freedom was not waiting for her. The Washington County Public Defender’s Office confirmed that ICE had placed a detainer on her jail file—a formal request to be notified before she was released. ICE used that detainer to intercept her release from county custody and transfer her directly into federal hands.

Her brother Carlo, who had attended the hearing, left relieved, expecting a call telling him when to pick her up.

“At the court, I saw my sister. I saw Daphy. She wasn’t having any problem,” Carlo told WTAE through an interpreter. He went home and waited.

The following day, February 27, ICE processed Michel at its Enforcement and Removal Operations office in Pittsburgh’s South Side and enrolled her in the agency’s Alternatives to Detention (ATD) program. A private contractor fitted her with a GPS ankle monitor. Then she was released—alone, in an unfamiliar city, with no transportation home, no coordination with her family and no follow-up plan.

The Department of Homeland Security, in a statement to reporters, defended its handling of the case: Michel had been released, it said, “with all of her belongings, including a fully charged phone, in sunny weather in the middle of Pittsburgh, where public transport is readily available.”

The claim is a study in selective truth. February 27 did reach a high of 50°F in Pittsburgh—a mild afternoon by late-winter standards. What DHS did not mention: the temperature fell to exactly 32°F that night. The following day, February 28, the high was 27°F. By the night of March 1—the night she is believed to have died—the temperature had dropped to 5°F. ICE released Daphy Michel into a pleasant Thursday afternoon and left her to survive a week that ended in single digits.

Pittsburgh’s South Side in late February is roughly an hour from Charleroi by car. The only bus connecting the two runs a few times a day and requires first reaching downtown Pittsburgh. Michel had no home in Pittsburgh, no family in the city and no confirmed place to stay. Between the night of February 27 and the morning of March 2, there is no public account of where she went, whether she sought shelter or whether anyone saw her.

Joseph Murphy, an attorney working with her family, noted that authorities had been fully aware of her mental health vulnerabilities throughout her months in custody. “How did she end up dead?” Murphy asked in an interview with TribLive. “You just can’t be dumping these people on the streets like this.” He added: “They brought her up here. They could have just as easily driven her 40 minutes back to Charleroi.”

On the morning of March 2, Port Authority maintenance workers found Michel at a bus shelter on East Carson Street, beneath the Smithfield Street Bridge on the South Side—less than 2 miles from the ICE office where she had been processed. She was on the ground, unresponsive, without a pulse. Emergency responders administered naloxone, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and a defibrillator three times. She was transported to UPMC Presbyterian Hospital, where she was pronounced dead. Doctors told her family the cause was cardiac arrest.

Data from her ankle monitor suggested she may have been dead for many hours before she was discovered. She was still wearing the ankle monitor when she was found.

ICE did not receive a tamper alert from the device until March 3—the day after her body was found, when the Allegheny County Medical Examiner’s Office cut it from her leg as part of standard intake. ICE officers then went to the Medical Examiner’s office. Staff there refused to cooperate. ICE subsequently involved the U.S. Marshals Service to retrieve the severed monitor. In a statement, DHS said ICE “was never given official notification of her passing, and found out about her death via the media thanks to the local county’s refusal to even have a conversation with federal law enforcement.” The Allegheny County Medical Examiner has not yet released an official cause or manner of death.

Attorney Joseph Murphy told WTAE:

This is an older brother. It’s his younger sister. They told him on a Thursday that the charges were dismissed and she was going to be released. She doesn’t come out on Friday. He gets a call on Monday that she’s dead.”

A policy, not an accident

Michel’s death is not an aberration. It is the deliberate policy of the Trump administration, carried out with the compliance of the Democratic Party at both the local and national level.

Last year, Democrats and Republicans in Congress together approved more than \$45 billion for a massive expansion of ICE detention capacity. The Washington County Board of Commissioners, which turned Michel over to ICE, is composed of two Republicans and one Democrat. Pittsburgh and Allegheny County—where the ICE detention center is located—are governed by Democrats who consider themselves part of the party’s so-called progressive wing. The county government passed a toothless resolution barring its employees from cooperating with ICE. It did not prevent what happened to Daphy Michel.

Haitian immigrants across the country have been a central target of the Trump administration’s fascistic campaign since before the election. Trump and then-vice-presidential candidate JD Vance repeatedly spread the false claim that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio were eating neighbors’ pets—a lie used to terrorize Haitian communities nationwide and incite threats against residents of that city. Since taking office, Trump has repeatedly

sought to terminate TPS for Haitians, Cubans and Venezuelans as a step toward their detention and deportation. Pittsburgh has seen a marked increase in ICE raids on workplaces, restaurants and homes.

A documented and deadly pattern

What happened to Michel fits a well-documented pattern. According to The Marshall Project and other outlets, detainees arrested in major cities such as Chicago have been transferred to facilities in Texas, Indiana and Michigan—hundreds of miles from their families and legal support. The National Immigrant Justice Center has documented cases in which individuals leave detention with little more than paperwork, no transportation and no clear path back to the communities where they were arrested.

The Vera Institute of Justice has documented instances in which immigrants with serious psychiatric conditions were released from detention without adequate planning, continuity of care or confirmed support. In one documented case, a detainee deemed mentally incompetent was released after prolonged confinement despite clear evidence he could not safely care for himself.

Michel’s case is not isolated. Nurul Amin Shah Alam, a nearly blind Rohingya refugee from Myanmar, was dropped by Border Patrol agents at a closed Tim Hortons coffee shop in Buffalo, New York, in freezing temperatures. Five days later he was found dead on the street, miles away. His family was never notified of where he had been left.

Deaths inside immigration detention have also risen sharply. According to official tallies, at least 32 people died while in ICE custody in 2024. In the first months of 2025, at least 11 more have died. Investigations have repeatedly documented delayed medical care, failure to respond to emergencies and inadequate mental health support. In Texas, the death of Geraldo Lunas Campos—who had a documented history of mental illness—was ruled a homicide following an encounter with guards during a mental health crisis.

The death of Daphy Michel is not the result of a few bad actors. It is the product of a system—built and funded by both political parties—designed to terrorize immigrant workers and the working class communities they are part of. She came to the United States seeking asylum. She was surveilled, jailed, intercepted and abandoned. The bracelet beeped. No one came.



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