ICE’s own investigations expose deadly medical neglect in US immigrant detention centers

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23 November 2026

Internal investigators for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement found that 23 of the 29 immigrants whose deaths they reviewed had received deficient medical care. The immigrants died in ICE custody from January 2025 through January 2026. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, which obtained the reviews under the Freedom of Information Act, reported the findings on November 6. The findings directly contradict the Trump administration’s repeated claims that detainees receive comprehensive medical care.

Among the victims was 39-year-old Ismael Ayala-Uribe, who died of septic shock in September 2025 after being detained at the Adelanto Processing Center in California. ICE investigators found that the facility’s medical department, which they determined was understaffed, failed to examine an abscess that became a fatal infection, to respond promptly to his complaints or to properly administer prescribed medications.

In another case, Huabing Xie complained of chest pain at a California detention facility, but neither of the supervising medical providers evaluated him or provided treatment. He died of a heart attack less than two hours later.

As the WSWS reported in September, immigrants in ICE detention across the country were denied access to medical care as the agency went more than 11 months without paying claims from outside providers. Hospitals and ambulance services were owed millions of dollars. For detainees who depended on outside specialists, the consequences included canceled appointments and months-long delays in obtaining cancer care.

The latest mortality reports were not voluntarily released. ICE briefly posted some of them online in September, then removed them. The *Chronicle* obtained the reviews through a Freedom of Information Act request after months of delay.

Despite the damning revelations, the agency has announced no disciplinary action against the personnel or private contractors responsible. ICE also declined to answer the *Chronicle*’s questions about whether anyone had been held accountable.

The revelations come as the Trump administration pours billions of dollars into expanding the immigration detention apparatus, imprisoning tens of thousands more immigrants while failing to provide adequate medical care. Across the country, detainees face denial of essential medications, inadequate treatment for serious illnesses, insufficient mental health care and dangerous delays in emergency treatment.

By November 6, the *Chronicle* had documented at least 62 deaths in ICE custody since Trump returned to office. A Reuters analysis published in June found that the death rate in ICE detention had more than doubled under his administration, from one death annually per 3,848 detainees from 2009 through 2024, compared with one per 1,630 under Trump.

A June investigation by the Associated Press and KFF Health News documented widespread allegations of medical neglect in ICE detention facilities across at least 33 states. Reporters reviewed thousands of federal court filings and interviewed more than 50 detainees, relatives and attorneys, uncovering more than 300 cases alleging delayed, denied or inadequate medical treatment.

Among the detainees was a 52-year-old Romanian immigrant recovering from multiple heart surgeries, including a triple bypass, who required 16 medications daily. He was hospitalized three times for chest pain. After the second hospitalization, he received only eight of his 16 prescribed medications, according to discharge papers cited by his lawyer. His court filing says he suffered a stroke during a video call with his daughter in August 2025. A federal judge ordered his release that November.

The neglect reaches even the basic conditions necessary to sustain life. At the GEO Group-operated Folkston Processing Center in Georgia, detainees described a diet consisting almost entirely of canned or frozen food, sometimes spoiled, with hot drinks and raw vegetables unavailable. At North Lake in Michigan, where hundreds of detainees staged a hunger strike in April, strikers reported receiving protein only once a week while food was thrown away. “The food here is absolute garbage,” one North Lake detainee said. At Delaney Hall in Newark, New Jersey, where 300 detainees struck in May, detainees reported finding live worms in their food.

The failures are not confined to the facilities themselves. A Scripps News investigation found that the CoreCivic-operated Stewart Detention Center in rural Lumpkin, Georgia, which holds approximately 2,000 immigrants, has repeatedly overwhelmed local ambulance services. Emergency dispatch records documented 206 calls for medical assistance, and ambulances were summoned from neighboring counties on at least 14 occasions because none were available locally.

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In one incident, three detainees required emergency transport simultaneously—one with an elevated heart rate, another vomiting blood and a third with an abnormal electrocardiogram. Only one ambulance was immediately available in the county. Even after emergency responders reached the facility, patients still faced a 35-mile trip to the nearest hospital. The detention center has offloaded responsibility for emergency medical care to local services that lack the resources to meet its demands.

ICE's internal mortality reviews document the fatal outcomes of these conditions. In at least eight cases, on-site medical personnel failed to administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) properly or not at all.

The disregard for immigrant workers' health and lives does not end at the detention centers. On September 20, an ICE agent shot 28-year-old Venezuelan delivery driver Wilber Rafael Garcés Pérez during a traffic stop in Austin, Texas. Despite a bullet lodged near his spine, Garcés Pérez was discharged from the hospital after about four hours and then transported 135 miles to an ICE detention center in Pearsall.

Garcés Pérez later reported that he had received no medication and was experiencing loss of sensation and movement on the left side of his body. He was taken back to a hospital for further treatment before being transferred back into ICE custody. Austin police confirmed that ICE agents had not provided medical assistance before local officers arrived at the scene of the shooting.

While the federal government allows the healthcare of those it imprisons to collapse, it pours unprecedented resources into expanding the detention apparatus. Under Trump's 2025 spending legislation, Congress allocated $45 billion for detention capacity through 2029. Between January 2025 and July 2026, the number of detention facilities more than doubled, from 134 to 272, and the average daily detainee population rose from about 39,000 to 66,000.

The federal government finances, directs and oversees this apparatus, which has grown under successive Democratic and Republican administrations. Under Barack Obama, millions of immigrants were deported, and his administration expanded family detention and maintained contracts with private prison corporations. The Biden administration continued operating the detention system despite extensive documentation of medical neglect, deaths in custody and abuses at facilities under federal supervision.

The aftermath of the November 3 midterm elections has made the detention system's bipartisan nature unmistakable. The elections inflicted a sweeping defeat on Trump and the Republicans, reflecting, in part, widespread popular opposition to the administration's attacks on immigrants. Yet the electoral repudiation has not halted collaboration. Trump's appointment of Stephen Miller, the principal architect of his anti-immigrant policies, as White House chief of staff after the Republican defeat signals an escalation rather than a retreat.

The Democrats, meanwhile, only posture as opponents of Miller while openly seeking bipartisanship with Trump. On November 8, House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries denounced Miller as "the architect of Donald Trump's violent mass deportation machine." Yet Jeffries has declined to call for abolishing ICE. Two days after the election, Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee summed up their program for the agency, declaring it was "time for ICE to take the masks off, turn the body cameras on, and start answering to the American people."

Since the election, the immigration Gestapo has continued to seize immigrants and assault citizens who document its raids. On November 15 in Modesto, California, ICE agents pepper-sprayed 23-year-old Lizbeth Vargas Andrade, a US citizen who was 12 weeks pregnant, according to her attorney. Video shows agents forcing her to the ground and handcuffing her on her stomach as her husband shouted that she was pregnant.

The healthcare crisis in the detention camps is not a separate phenomenon but a concentrated expression of the capitalist healthcare system, in which tens of millions of workers face substandard treatment, crushing medical debt and the denial of essential care, all for the enrichment of insurance and hospital corporations.

The same government that denies medical care to workers in its custody has turned the threat of imprisonment and deportation against opponents of the US-backed genocide in Gaza. ICE detained Mahmoud Khalil, a lawful permanent resident who represented the Columbia student protesters in negotiations with the university. It jailed Ya'akub Ira Vijandre, a photojournalist protected under DACA, because he refused to become an FBI informant. Cornell doctoral student Momodou Taal left the country under threat of deportation after the administration revoked his student visa over his participation in campus protests.

Immigrant workers are an integral part of the working class, not a separate population whose rights can be attacked without consequences for all workers. The persecution of immigrants is intended to intimidate and divide the working class while strengthening the state's repressive power. The attack on immigrants is an attack on all workers—as the January murders and cover-up of two US citizens, Renée Good and Alex Pretti, by federal immigration agents in Minneapolis made brutally clear.

Defending immigrant workers' right to healthcare, freedom and democratic rights requires the political unity of immigrant and native-born workers. Such unity cannot be achieved through the AFL-CIO and the trade union bureaucracy, which have promoted nationalist divisions on which the anti-immigrant crackdown depends and have subordinated workers to the Democratic Party and the defense of American capitalism.

Workers must draw lessons from the bipartisan assault on immigrants and build an independent socialist movement against both capitalist parties and the profit system they defend. Its demands must include abolishing ICE and the entire detention apparatus, ending deportations, releasing all detainees and securing full and equal rights for all immigrant workers.

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