

April 8, 2020

Dear Senator Cardin,

I am writing on behalf of Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice (UUSJ) in response to the unprecedented threats created by the current coronavirus pandemic for people detained in unsafe facilities operated by or for the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. These conditions require a rapid, comprehensive response. For humanitarian and public health reasons all detainees of ICE, except those who ICE can show pose a danger to the community, should be released on their own recognizance or by using other alternatives to detention as quickly as possible.

Promoting Unitarian Universalist values at the federal level, UUSJ partners with congregations and individual members across the nation -- including your constituents -- to amplify their voices. We have a long history of fighting for just and humane treatment of immigrants and refugees, guided by our Principles of affirming the worth and dignity of all, and justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We also celebrate the rich diversity they bring to our country.

The coronavirus has created immediate threats to the health and lives of thousands of detainees at ICE facilities nationally. In our area, you are no doubt aware of what appears to be a hunger strike at the ICE facility in Farmville, Virginia, responding to unsafe conditions there. In Washington State, where coronavirus infections are soaring, 95 people at the Northwest Detention Center have started a hunger strike asking for temporary humanitarian visas in order to be reunited with their families. In Massachusetts, after public pressure, immigrant detainees have obtained soap and cleaning supplies, but still fear for their lives in overcrowded conditions at the Bristol County Jail. These are just a few examples of the crises facing detainees across the country. As of March 30, at least four detainees in ICE detention centers and 33 ICE personnel had tested positive for COVID-19.

**We ask you to request that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) release detainees who pose no danger to the community as soon as possible. All detainees, except those who ICE can show pose a threat of violence to the community, should be released for humanitarian reasons on their own recognizance or using other alternatives to detention.**

Increasing the use of alternatives to detention during this pandemic is not only important for the health of these immigrants but also for the health of the ICE workforce and the public. Currently overcrowded ICE detention facilities, including local jails and private facilities, are not able to implement social distancing guidelines to combat the spread of coronavirus. Unless substantial numbers of detainees are released, these facilities will continue to be breeding grounds for the virus, which will continue to make its way into the community. In these circumstances, ICE should be expanding use of alternatives to detention.

We appreciate and thank you for your past support for a more humane immigration system. We call upon you and your colleagues to respond rapidly to this crisis in ICE detention. Lives are literally at stake.

Sincerely,



Robert W. Denniston  
Board Chair

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