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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

Immigrants in NJ Detention Center Organize Hunger Strike; NYIFUP Condemns Egregious Conditions in Local ICE Jails Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

NYC Public Defenders Demand ICE Release Vulnerable Immigrants In Local Jails And Halt All Arrests During Public Health Crisis

(NEW YORK, NY) – The Legal Aid Society, Brooklyn Defender Services, and The Bronx Defenders – New York City’s defender organizations providing free legal representation to detained immigrants through the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP) – today released the following statements in response to reports that an entire unit of incarcerated immigrants have organized a hunger strike at Essex County Correctional Facility as of Tuesday, March 17, and the mounting reports of egregious conditions and a complete lack of basic sanitation measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in New York City-area detention facilities operated by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Amid this increasingly dangerous global pandemic, NYIFUP said:

“Since the start of this pandemic, we have been calling on ICE and the wardens of the local jails to ensure that they are implementing appropriate safety and preventive measures to protect our clients and all currently-detained people from COVID-19. They have failed to provide any guidance on these measures or to heed our requests to release all people from ICE custody, including vulnerable people who are particularly susceptible to infection. Instead, we are now receiving multiple reports from the detained people we represent and their family members that they are being subjected to dangerous conditions throughout these jails, putting them at further risk of contracting and spreading the COVID-19 virus.

“The information we’ve received that conditions at the Essex County Correctional Facility have deteriorated to such an extent that people incarcerated there have launched a hunger strike just underlines how deeply problematic ICE’s management of the situation is. We are in the midst of an unprecedented crisis. ICE has done nothing to rise to the occasion but instead continues to put the lives of hundreds of people at risk. For the health and safety of all, we demand the immediate release of all people currently in ICE custody and the halting of all arrests by ICE.”

Included below are statements and reports we have received from currently incarcerated people at the Essex County Correctional Facility, the Hudson County Correctional Facility, the Orange County Jail, and the Bergen County Jail.

On March 17, 2020, we received the following statement from people incarcerated at the Essex County Correctional Facility:

“2B3 is on a hunger strike. We are asking our fellow brothers in ICE to join us. We are also asking the kitchen workers that work in the main kitchen downstairs to not go to work. The point of this is to ask for release. Releasing meaning on bond, bracelet or the people with final deportation orders that actually want to be deported get them on their plane ASAP. This coronavirus is getting out of control and if we were to be infected I am sure everyone would rather die on the outside with our families than in here. Both wardens have stated that they will not interfere with our situation as long as it does not interfere with the regular operation of the jail. This means no fighting, no arguing with the COs over this. We still have to lock in on time, we still have to clean. The wardens understand that our problem is not with us, it’s with ICE. They have instructed their sergeants and lieutenants to not interfere with what we are trying to do. Finally, we ask these of you who can have their family call the news and tell them what’s happening to push the issue of releasing us because after all we are not criminals. We are here on a civil matter - not criminal. We shouldn't have to stay locked up during an on processing deadly pandemic. I hope you will join us because there is power in numbers and this is a fight not only for our freedom but also for our health and safety.”

People incarcerated at the Hudson County Correctional Facility have raised numerous concerns about the lack of sanitizing materials, prolonged isolation, substandard living conditions, lack of medical attention, and other harrowing reports of mistreatment and neglect:

- Substandard Living Conditions and Medical Care:
 - One person reported that he has not been given soap, hand sanitizer, or other cleaning materials. To use the phone, he covers it with a sock. Another person reported to his wife that he was moved from his cell to a visibly dirty cell. No one will provide him with soap, hand sanitizer, and he was instructed to limit flushing the toilet, causing feces and urine to sit in the toilet and producing odor inside each cell. He also reported exceptionally cold temperatures and that detainees were freezing, but requests for additional layers/blankets were denied.
 - One person was sent to solitary confinement for three days as punishment for showering too late in the morning. There, he did not receive his epilepsy medicine and he was not given sheets or a mattress. He became sick in solitary from how dirty it was and even spit up blood. Another person reported to his wife that he was not being allowed to shower regularly.
 - One person reported that there is no longer a way to call for medical attention. Instead, jail staff are going around asking people if they have complaints, noting down the answer, and then doing nothing whatsoever in response.
- Prolonged Isolation: One person reported that detainees in his dorm block were informed they would be locked in their cells from 1:00 pm on March, 17, 2020 until 2:00 pm the next day, March 18, 2020. Several people have reported that they have been moved around to different floors and cells and that they must remain in their cells 21 hours a day. Others reported being quarantined and on lock down for approximately 24 hours or 16 hours a day.
- Denial of Food: One person reported to his wife that detainees were only given breakfast and no lunch. Around dinnertime, detainees began to complain and were finally given dinner sometime after 7PM.
- Denial of Due Process: Several people have been denied access to counsel as video calls are regularly canceled or have serious technical problems that prohibit communication. Dozens of people have been unable to speak to their lawyers and multiple video calls have been canceled with no notice to attorneys.

People incarcerated at the Orange County Jail and Bergen County Jail have reported similarly:

- At the Orange County Jail, several people have reported that they are still prohibited from having hand sanitizer as it is considered contraband. Corrections officers have access to hand sanitizer, and one person reported that a corrections officer was taunting other incarcerated people in the unit with it. Another person and his wife reported that newly arrested individuals were brought to cells and told they could not leave for approximately one week. He said that he can hear these people crying as they are distraught over their complete isolation.
- At the Bergen County Jail, one person's wife reported that an entire unit of approximately 30 people were moved to solitary confinement "until the coronavirus is under control." Another incarcerated person reported that the only cleaning materials that are available to them is watered-down hand soap rather than the necessary disinfectant cleaning materials, such as Lysol or bleach. This same person reported that the corrections officers have access to these disinfectant cleaning materials for their work stations.

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The New York Family Immigrant Unity Project ([NYIFUP](#)) is the nation's first public defender system for immigrants facing deportation—defined as those in removal proceedings before an immigration judge. Funded by the New York City Council since July 2014, the program provides a free attorney to almost all detained indigent immigrants facing deportation at Varick Street Immigration.