



March 11, 2021

Contacts:

Alejandra Lopez, The Legal Aid Society, AILopez@legal-aid.org, 917-294-9348

Daniel Ball, Brooklyn Defender Services, dball@bds.org

Ryan Karerat, The Bronx Defenders, rkarerat@bronxdefenders.org

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

The New York Immigrant Family Unity Project Demands Answers on Vaccination Plan for Detained Immigrants

(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)**, sent letters demanding answers regarding plans for COVID-19 vaccine distribution to people in immigration detention. In separate letters to the [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement \(ICE\)](#) New York field office, [Bergen County Jail](#), and [Orange County Correctional Facility](#), NYIFUP asked for details on how these facilities plan to ensure vaccine access for detained immigrants and people employed at the facilities, as well as plans to include educational and informational resources to ensure all people can make informed decisions about whether to take the vaccine.

NYIFUP released the following statement:

“The need for COVID-19 vaccine access at jails, prisons, and immigration detention facilities, such as the Bergen County Jail and the Orange County Correctional Facility, is universally agreed upon by medical, public health, and corrections experts, as well as policymakers, advocates, and directly impacted people. The most basic precautions to prevent spread of COVID-19, such as social distancing and use of personal protective equipment, are nearly

impossible to implement effectively in these facilities, and immigration detention centers have proven particularly vulnerable to virus outbreaks, with rates of infection 13.4 times higher than the general population.

ICE has not published any vaccination plans, and it is not clear whether the agency has even begun to offer vaccinations to those detained in these county jails. Since the early days of this pandemic more than a year ago, ICE has consistently failed to protect people in its custody, leading to numerous deaths and unspeakable suffering, all of which were avoidable. Knowing for months that a vaccine would be available soon, ICE once again failed to take action. In light of the dangerous conditions at these facilities, ICE's lack of transparency and failure to timely develop and implement a vaccination plan for those in immigration detention defies basic public health guidelines and underscores the agency's disregard for human life.

ICE puts the health and safety of everyone in immigrant detention at risk every day through their negligence and incompetence. We call on ICE and the local facilities that hold ICE contracts to immediately provide comprehensive vaccine access to all people in custody, and to ensure that people have access to educational and informational resources they need to make informed decisions about their medical care.

Immigration detention has never been just or safe, and our clients have long faced harmful conditions that threaten their health, safety, and lives. While access to the vaccine is an important step towards dramatically reducing the risk of COVID-19, ultimately, the best and most humane way to stop the spread of the virus is to decarcerate. To that end, we renew our demand that ICE free all immigrants from detention and halt enforcement.”

BACKGROUND: 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 the Varick Street Immigration Court in New York City.