



INTERFAITH COMMUNITY FOR DETAINED IMMIGRANTS

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship**

“The Expansion and Troubling Use of ICE Detention”

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**Testimony of Melanie Schikore, Executive Director
of the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants**

My name is Melanie Schikore and I have been part of the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants (ICDI)¹ since 2010. I started as a volunteer, served on the board when the organization sought official 501(c) status, and have been the Executive Director of ICDI since 2015.

ICDI is a community of many faiths coming together around the issues of immigration and detention, holding the belief that each individual has dignity and worth and that we are charged with each other’s well-being. We are called to respond through direct service to the suffering of adults and children negatively impacted by the broken and inhumane immigration system; and we are called to advocate for systemic change including compassionate immigration reform. It is in this spirit of compassionate advocacy that I submit this testimony to contribute to the body of information being examined with regard to immigrant detention and alternatives to detention that will inform decision making around HR 3923, the Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act of 2017.

BACKGROUND

I have worked in the realm of immigration and the margins of cultural adjustment since 1990 when my career path was impacted by what I witnessed and experienced at the International Institute, an immigrant and refugee resettlement agency in Saint Louis, Missouri.² I feel

¹ Website: www.icdi.chicago.org

² International Institute: www.iistl.org

fortunate to have worked so closely with immigrants and to have gained a deep understanding early in my life of how difficult it is to come to a new country, raise children who want to be American even as you want them to understand where they come from, how little assistance is given to immigrants and how short a time frame one has to learn English, get a job, and be independent.

Later I worked as a public school teacher in Los Angeles where the majority of children and families were undocumented, in a Chicago-based family literacy program in Latino neighborhoods, and in a literacy program for Roma families living in makeshift shanty towns in Madrid, Spain.

While conducting doctoral research in community-based learning and organization, I spent six years providing educational and other support to migrant workers in the thoroughbred racing industry including a period in which I lived in the migrant housing and worked as a hotwalker in the barns. I became acutely aware of the challenges of migrant workers and their families in negotiating a transitory and contingent life in the United States, including shortcomings of the flawed H2B visa program.

At Concordia University, I trained teachers how to properly instruct and assess immigrant bilingual students and how to cross cultural divides and work inclusively with their families.

In the nearly thirty years since my initial experience with refugee resettlement I have witnessed how it has gotten even more difficult for people who come to this country.

My experience with people from all over the world in various settings as well as human history itself leaves no doubt that migration is a human need, just as it is an animal need. When a bird doesn't have the food it needs because of the season, it migrates to another place where it can eat. When the habitat of the sloth is destroyed because of logging, it moves elsewhere. People are no different and when their safety, livelihood, beliefs, or family is threatened, they will leave and seek a place where they can do what we all hope to do: live, love, laugh, learn, and be part of a safe community. As long as there are people on the planet there will be people who need to relocate to meet their needs. As the title of a new book about family and migration in the 21st century by Jason DeParle says, "A Good Provider is One Who Leaves".³

³ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/313176/a-good-provider-is-one-who-leaves-by-jason-deparle/>

INTERFAITH COMMUNITY FOR DETAINED IMMIGRANTS

The Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants (ICDI) is a 501(c)3 faith-based organization in the Chicago area, founded by Sisters of Mercy JoAnn Persch and Pat Murphy in 2007. When the sisters were denied entry to provide pastoral care to people detained and being deported, they formed an interfaith coalition which resulted ultimately in the Access to Religious Ministry Act of 2008⁴ which passed unanimously in the Illinois House and the Senate. The law affords religious workers access to immigrant detention centers. This provision is unique in the United States and many immigrants elsewhere in the country do not receive spiritual support.⁵

ICDI has a staff of 10 and over 300 volunteers from a multitude of faith backgrounds: Catholic, Theist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Humanist, Unitarian Universalist, Sikh, Buddhist, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Jewish, Evangelical, Hindu, Baptist, Muslim, Episcopalian, Polish Orthodox and more. We come together through a shared belief in the dignity and worth of *all* human beings, including ICE officers and jail staff. All of the world's faiths have a way of referencing our interconnectedness and our responsibility to care for one another.

The heart of our work is the pastoral care visits we make weekly in four immigrant detention centers. We meet with people in detention and accompany and support them in this difficult time of their lives. We make over 8000 visits yearly with over 5000 different men and women.⁶

We also attend and monitor immigration court hearings Monday through Friday, putting our bodies in the courtroom since the immigrants themselves appear only by video camera, providing a human presence of witness in often dehumanizing proceedings.⁷ We monitor over 2000 hearings a year.

We assist families who are losing a loved one to deportation by accompanying them and supporting them spiritually at this difficult time.⁸ We pray on the buses full of people being deported before they leave. Over 200 families and over 3000 deportees are assisted yearly.

⁴ <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?Name=095-1022>

⁵ <https://religionnews.com/2018/10/25/for-ice-detainees-access-to-clergy-is-infrequent-or-absent-altogether-rights-groups-say/>

⁶ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-immigrants-mchenry-detention-center-met-20170323-story.html>

⁷ <https://chronicleillinois.com/government/immigrant-deportation-video-saves-time-can-dehumanizing-2/>

⁸ <https://chronicleillinois.com/news/cook-county-news/families-say-goodbye-broadview-deportation-center/>

We provide spiritual care for children who are detained without a parent in centers contracted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) by making visits and also providing faith-specific services and celebrations. These children either migrated without an adult or were separated at the border. Annually we visit over 1500 children.

We have also been successful in diverting young people who are “aging out” of unaccompanied minor detention from going to jail on their 18th birthdays. By accepting them into our Alternative To Detention program, the Marie Joseph House, or referring them to two other Chicago area alternatives for aging out youth, Viator House and Bethany House, they live in community and develop skills to be healthy and independent young adults rather than experiencing imprisonment.

We have a hotline to provide people upon release from detention with food, bus tickets, and clothing, and assist them to get home to loved ones. On an annual basis we help over 600 people get home.

We have multiple housing and support services that provide alternatives to detention and care after release from detention.

All of these programs mitigate the harms of an immigration and detention system styled after criminal systems. They are minimal forms of harm reduction, spiritual band-aids in a system that needs a complete overhaul and redesign. We should not be detaining people at the rates that we do nor in the conditions of the current detention system.

MARIE JOSEPH HOUSE PARTICIPANTS

I cannot stress enough the need for support for newly arriving people. The namesake of the Marie Joseph House was a woman from Haiti who we met in McHenry County Jail. She was released without housing or support and after being taken to a temporary shelter she disappeared. Three days later her body was found in an abandoned building. This tragedy and the sentiment of never again wanting something like this to occur led to the efforts to create housing for immigrants released from detention.

People who migrate are vulnerable. The traumatic histories of the people we serve are complex.⁹ There are traumas experienced in home country which led to the need to depart;

⁹ Aragona, M., Pucci, D., Mazzetti, M., Maisano, B., & Geraci, S. (2013). Traumatic events, post-migration living difficulties and post-traumatic symptoms in first generation immigrants: a primary care study. *Annali dell'Istituto superiore di sanita*, 49, 169-175.

traumas incurred on the dangerous migration route; and trauma from being detained in a jail setting and treated like a criminal when one has asked for help.

People come into our care in various ways. Through an MOU with ICE we are able to inquire about anyone that we meet in jail who says they don't have family or friends in the US. One example of this is a woman that we met in detention who was pregnant and very sick. ICE released her to our care and she had her baby while in our program. We also get referrals from around the country from lawyers with clients who could be released if they have stable housing. Additionally, ICE contacts us about detainees they want to release to care such as a Russian man who was hunger striking and depressed or a family from Swaziland that arrived at O'Hare airport asking for asylum. The only other option was to send them to family detention at the border. Instead they came into our care. Lastly, we work with ORR, ICE, and children's detention centers in Chicago to accept aging out minors who would otherwise be shackled and put in adult detention on their 18th birthday.

Everyone in our care received individualized case management. We identify acute and immediate needs and also create a short- and long-term plan. We refer to medical, dental, mental health, legal, educational, and vocational partners. We refer victims of torture to the Kovler Center where they receive specialized counseling. All participants have legal representation. Participants also get cultural and language competency. They learn English and learn how to take public transportation, open a bank account, use a gas stove, bundle themselves for Chicago winter, enroll in school, and much more. They live in a supportive community, make friends, get work authorization and find jobs, and are well on their way to adjusting to life in this country.¹⁰ The average stay with us is 1.5 years for those released with a pending case and 6 months to a year for those released with asylum.

In our care are two children who were ripped from their mother's arms at the border and sent to child detention in Chicago. Their mothers were detained elsewhere and their reunification was made possible because we offer long-term stable housing and support.

Our participants are from Nigeria, Pakistan, Ghana, Sudan, Kashmir, Gambia, Honduras, Somalia, China, El Salvador, Haiti, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Guatemala, Congo, Cameroon, Senegal, Uganda, Jamaica, Russia, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Cuba, Tunisia, Ethiopia, and more.

They have become CDL truck drivers, hotel hospitality workers, restaurant workers, part of demolition crews, factory workers, auto repair workers, and more. Several have gotten CNA

¹⁰ <https://news.wttw.com/2017/06/05/hyde-park-home-alternative-detention-refugees-asylum-seekers>; <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-met-marie-joseph-house-20180727-story.html>

certification. One participant passed the MCAT and is being recruited by medical schools around the country because of his high score. We also have a robotics entrepreneur and a computer programmer. Given the right supports when new to the country has allowed them to thrive and become contributing members of society.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE INSTEAD?

Hospitality: In 2014 with support from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) and other funding we opened the Marie Joseph House.¹¹ This alternative to detention is highlighted along with two other ATD programs in the report *A Better Way*, compiled by the National Immigrant Justice Center¹².

Community Based Case Management: In 2015, ICDI implemented a pilot called Family Placement Alternatives in collaboration with LIRS.¹³ We provided community-based case management services to 10 families leaving immigration detention. This pilot program was designed in part to provide a basis for expansion of the Family Case Management Program (FCMP). However, ICDI decided not to participate in the implementation of the FCMP under the contract developed by ICE when GEO Care, a division of the private for profit GEO Group, was awarded the contract.¹⁴

Second Stage Housing and Services: In addition to the Marie Joseph House, we oversee a 2nd stage housing cooperative as an option for people who leave the Marie Joseph House to live in a supportive community. The cooperative is self-governing and everyone there works and makes a financial contribution which covers the cost of the lease and other community goods. They are gently supported as needed by our organization as a safety net after we learned that if pushed into full independence (and often isolation through the act of moving out), participants remained at risk of homelessness if they lost their job or had pressing financial needs in their home country.

We also have several community-based partnerships with faith communities who do the bulk of work supporting a family or several individuals living together and ICDI acts as a support and consultant to their efforts. Partnering with faith communities that express a willingness

¹¹ https://healtorture.org/sites/healtorture.org/files/ATJ%20one%20pager_2015.pdf

¹² Secor, D, Altman, H and Tidwell Cullen, T (2018), National Immigrant Justice Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.immigrantjustice.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-files/no-content-type/2019-04/A-Better-Way-report-April2019-FINAL-full.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Family-Placement-Alternatives-Final-Report.pdf> and

¹⁴ "Immigration: Alternatives to Detention (ATD) Programs," Congressional Research Service,. July 2019 <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/library/P16371.pdf>

and interest in hosting people new to this country is an area of expansion in our programming.

Family Reunification: Additionally, we have supported the newly arriving families of two participants when they received authorization to come to the United States. We have several more awaiting approvals of their spouses and children.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

Whereas immigration detention costs an average of \$134/day (with a range of \$70 to \$200), alternatives to detention was found to be less than 7% of that of detention in the Government Accountability Office's 2014 report. For more discussion about the cost see The Math of Immigration Detention, 2018 Update: Costs Continue to Multiply.¹⁵

ATDs cost less but we should not just concern ourselves with the cost but with what one gets for the money spent. The outcomes must be considered. No one leaves immigrant detention better than when they got there but everyone leaves the Marie Joseph House better than when they got there. They are healthier, they have improved their English language skills, have completed work training of some kind, have cultural adjustment know-how (they know how to ride public transportation, how to use American appliances, how to open a bank account, etc.) and have begun their healing journey and adjustment to life in the US. When we consider what is known about prolonged stress and lack of support systems impacting long term health outcomes, it behooves us to intervene and prevent what will become significant societal costs when people are not healthy and functioning well. The ATD model helps individuals, but it is also better for all of us.

GLOBAL NORMS

Detaining people at the current rates and in jail settings is not the global norm. In the words of one of our participants from Ghana who was fleeing persecution because he is gay, "I traveled through fourteen countries to get here and the only place they shackled me and put me in jail was the United States. 'Welcome to America' they said."

ICDI is part of a number of local, regional and national networks and coalitions of visitation and housing programs and belongs to the International Detention Coalition, a global network of over 400 civil society organizations and individuals in almost 90 countries that advocate

¹⁵ <https://immigrationforum.org/article/math-immigration-detention-2018-update-costs-continue-multiply/>

for research and provide direct services to refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants affected by immigration detention. The International Detention Coalition has documented over 260 different ATDs around the world. ATDs are a crucial part of solving the brokenness of our immigration system.

ATDs are effective at ensuring compliance and they cost less than detention. But the success of an ATD isn't only these two important measures. ATDs enhance the preservation and protection of human dignity. Through a holistic approach they reduce trauma and assist with healing and health adjustment which is important for individuals and communities.

Fostering a sense of welcome and belonging is part of how you weave the fabric of a healthy society and this makes the whole world safer when people feel they are part of a community, learn from and with each other to build towards the skills and sensibility of citizenship. In contrast, when you make people feel unwelcome, unwanted, and that they don't belong here it puts everyone at risk. The literature on radicalization describes belonging as an important component of prevention.¹⁶

In our current system, not only is there a presumption of detention but there is a chain of dehumanization that cannot be explained only by bureaucracy and safety concerns. These include the increased use of technology for hearings and visitation, with families in the same building visiting loved ones by video screen, not in person, and hearings and court by video and en masse. We witness weekly as families say goodbye to a loved one being deported via iPad. The for-profit motives of detention are also part of the dehumanization, as are the problematic assumptions and implementation of ICE Risk Categorization Assessments.¹⁷ More immigrants remain in detention using the RCA than criminals assessed similarly.¹⁸

Immigrants are vulnerable at all junctures of the system. The design of all aspects of the immigration system needs to recognize their vulnerability. We must include directly impacted people in the design and anticipate unintended consequences, creating mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating systems so that opportunities to improve are built in. In the transition towards community based Alternatives To Detention that can be scaled to meet the challenges of helping newly released and newly arriving asylum seekers and other previously detained people move successfully from detention, the participation of non-profit organizations, community members and the formerly detained in transparent partnership with

¹⁶ Lyons-Padilla, S., Gelfand, M. J., Mirahmadi, H., Farooq, M., & Van Egmond, M. (2015). Belonging nowhere: Marginalization & radicalization risk among Muslim immigrants. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 1(2), 1-12. Retrieved from: https://behavioralpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/BSP_vol1is2_-Lyons-Padilla.pdf

¹⁷ http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/ice_risk_assessment_tool_now_only_recommends_detain

¹⁸ Nofferi, M., & Koulis, R. (2014). The immigration detention risk assessment. *Geo. Immigr. LJ*, 29, 45.

accountable government organizations should look more like the successful track record of the United States' best refugee resettlement efforts¹⁹ rather than the punitive model that has prevailed in recent years. Non-profit organizations that can employ participatory community and service design principles that have at their center the concerns of asylum seekers, immigrants and the communities they enter are best poised to address the needs of people who pose no threat and do not warrant detention.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, based on the direct experience of ICDI and the immense body of literature supporting a humane approach to the human right to migrate, I urge you all to do your part in reforming and reconfiguring the current immigration system such that human needs are centered and detention is used minimally and only as a last resort. The vast majority of people seeking refuge in the United States do not pose a threat. It is a stain on our nation's history to imprison people who are vulnerable, have significant trauma histories, and are simply doing what anyone would do if they could not live safely or take care of their family where they are.

Additionally, I urge you to work to surface the root causes of migration and intervene in all ways possible when US trade policies, political interventions, and consumerism make us complicit in the conditions that cause the need to migrate.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

¹⁹ The US Refugee Resettlement Program — A Return to First Principles: How Refugees Help to Define, Strengthen, and Revitalize the United States, Donald Kerwin First Published August 2, 2018 Research Article, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2331502418787787>