



**FREEDOM
FOR IMMIGRANTS**

TOGETHER WE WILL END IMMIGRATION DETENTION



association of **visitors** to
immigration detainees

Moral Outrage Transcends Borders As Pandemic Reaches Inside Immigration Detention

*An open letter to the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom calling for the release of all people from immigration detention on behalf of **40 visitation groups** representing **1,778 volunteers** who regularly visit people in **47 immigration detention facilities** in both countries.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought public health sharply into focus. For you to be kept safe, I must be too. And nowhere is this more apparent than in immigration detention.

Two of the largest immigration detention systems have so far responded woefully inadequately. The United States--which maintains the oldest and largest detention system in the world—and the United Kingdom—which maintains one of the largest in Europe—have continued to detain migrants indefinitely in prison environments.

Members of Freedom for Immigrants and AVID - Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees, which convene networks of volunteer visitor groups across the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, are calling for the release of all people from immigration detention. Volunteer visitor groups not only provide interpersonal support to people isolated in detention centers, they also monitor for human and civil rights abuses.

In both countries, medical care is subcontracted out to private providers who have been criticized for limited hours of care, staffing levels that do not meet demand, and poor emergency care. This has resulted in a devastating failure to prevent communicable diseases in U.S. detention, such as mumps, chicken pox, and measles. Substandard medical care also has contributed to a rising death toll of 39 people under the Trump administration alone, including a 39-year old British man who died earlier this year at the Baker County center in Florida. In the U.K., inquests into detention deaths have revealed a series of gross failures and neglect. The death of a U.S. citizen at the Harmondsworth center outside London, at the time run by the U.S.-based GEO Group, revealed a “shambolic” approach to medical record keeping and severe lack of mental health training.

People in immigration detention are always vulnerable to abuse and medical neglect. During a health pandemic, the likelihood of abuse occurring is at an all-time high. Both countries have responded to COVID-19 by terminating all social visits to immigration detention. This leaves migrants without independent medical support and--crucially--without face-to-face contact with family, the community, and lawyers in many cases.

Through calls and letters to Freedom for Immigrants and AVID, detained people report widespread instances which show it is impossible to comply with public health guidance inside detention. People in detention are being forced to sleep and eat less than six feet away from each other. In many centers, there is not enough soap and antibacterial gel.

In at least 81 U.S. detention centers, Freedom for Immigrants has documented in a real-time map extreme inadequate medical responses and abuse. For example, at Pine Prairie in Louisiana, staff have used pepper spray against migrants for organizing in response to COVID-19 fears. At the Yuba County Jail in California, the sheriff asked community advocates to provide 1,000 homemade masks, despite the fact that Yuba County receives \$6.5 million for immigration detention annually.

In the US, some detention centers are implementing ad-hoc quarantines, requiring people to stay in their six-by-eight foot rooms 23 hours a day, sometimes without running water or functioning toilets. Similar restrictions to the regime in UK detention centres is having a devastating impact on mental health. At Brook House, already the subject of a public inquiry in the U.K. into horrendous abuses, anxiety and tension over ongoing detention escalated into a mass self harm last month with at least one hospitalization. Extended periods of isolation run counter to human rights principles and when the private prison company G4S that operates Brook House sent letters to vulnerable people at risk of dying stating that they would be placed in solitary confinement if they developed COVID-19 symptoms, people told us they were afraid of dying alone. People detained in both countries are not being provided with sufficient access to psychiatrists, therapists, chaplaincy services, or outdoor recreation.

This mismanagement has already led to 4,702 confirmed COVID-19 cases among people held in U.S. immigration detention, including six deaths related to COVID-19, but Freedom for Immigrants own research indicates inconsistencies in U.S. government reporting. There also remains a growing number of cases in the United Kingdom. Exact figures are unknown in the UK as there is no published policy on testing and figures are not shared.

And this is just the beginning. In this time of a global pandemic, the only way to ensure that the hundreds of thousands of people needlessly detained do not contract COVID-19 is to facilitate their release. That's why Freedom for Immigrants and AVID have been calling for the safe, timely and managed release of all detained migrants into the care of their communities.

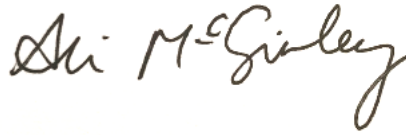
While the United Kingdom has significantly reduced its detention population in recent weeks to approximately 700, the hostile environment has continued, with people still being brought into detention and removals still going ahead. The United States still maintains nearly 30,000 people in immigration detention on any given day.

Time is running out. We need swift action from both governments to facilitate the release of all immigrants with urgency. Otherwise, we will all soon be asking ourselves, in the words of a group

of men at the Buffalo Federal Detention Facility in New York, "How many must die before something is done?"

For further information, please contact Christina Fialho at Freedom for Immigrants, CFialho@freedomforimmigrants.org, and Ali McGinley at AVID, Ali.McGinley@aviddetention.org.uk.

Sincerely,



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On behalf of the following independent visitor volunteer groups:

Adelanto Visitation Network (United States)
Adelanto Visitors (United States)
Advocate Visitors with Immigrants in Detention in the Chihuahuan Desert (United States)
AIDNW Visitation (United States)
Asylee Advocate Group of Stony Brook University (United States)
Asylum Welcome (United Kingdom)
Baker Interfaith Friends (United States)
CLUE Ventura County (United States)
Community Asylum Seekers Project (United States)
Detention Action (United Kingdom)
Etowah Visitation Project (United States)
Faithful Friends/Amigos Fieles (United States)
First Friends of NJ & NY (United States)
Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees (United States)
Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (United Kingdom)
Guadalupe Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) Detention Ministry (United States)
Houston Migrant Outreach Coalition (United States)
Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants (United States)
Iowans for Immigrant Freedom (United States)
Jesuit Refugee Service UK (United Kingdom)
Justice for Immigrant Seeking Asylum (United States)
Justice for Migrant Families (United States)

Kern Welcoming and Extending Solidarity to Immigrants (KWESI) (United States)
Larne House Visitor Group (United Kingdom)
Lewes Foreign National Visitor Project (United Kingdom)
Los Visitantes (United States)
Louisiana Advocates for Immigrants in Detention (United States)
Manchester Immigration Detainee Support Team (United Kingdom)
Morton Hall Detainee Visitor Group (United Kingdom)
New Hampshire Immigrant Visitation Program (United States)
Programa de Visitas Casa Mariposa (United States)
Refugee Support Network (United States)
Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network (United States)
San Fernando Valley Indivisible (United States)
Scottish Detainee Visitors (United Kingdom)
SOAS Detainee Support (United Kingdom)
Sojourners (United States)
Sudanese Visitors' Group (United Kingdom)
United Church of Christ / Christian Church (United States)
Yarl's Wood Befrienders (United Kingdom)