

Toolkit | Immigration Detention Oversight and Accountability

A Guide for Members of Congress Visiting ICE Jails

Updated June 2025

Since President Trump returned to office, the federal government has spent record-breaking amounts of taxpayer funds to jail more people in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention than ever before. ICE's sprawling detention apparatus covers more than 40 states and U.S. territories, and the agency is striking new agreements with private prison companies with ties to cabinet officials, new contracts with Bureau of Prisons (BOP) jails, and offshoring the jailing of immigrants to Guantánamo Bay and El Salvador. The administration also re-started the inhumane practice of detaining families, and plans to expand to more military bases.

The administration is seeking to double or even triple the system's current capacity. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kristi Noem [admitted](#) in May 2025 that DHS was spending at a rate far beyond appropriated levels, gambling that the department would get an extra \$170 billion to supercharge immigration detention through the partisan reconciliation proposal.

Congressional oversight is critical to evaluate these historic spending and budgetary increases to jail immigrants, as well as the alarmingly abusive conditions immigrants face under this new phase of mass incarceration. This toolkit provides a step-by-step guide for members of Congress to plan visits to ICE detention facilities in their districts and engage in oversight.

The Trump administration is [attempting to suppress](#) and deter authorized congressional oversight of immigration detention facilities – in contravention of appropriations law that has been in place for years. It is imperative for lawmakers, *now more than ever*, to visit ICE facilities to fulfill their oversight responsibilities.

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1. Can members of Congress visit immigration jails without prior notice?

Yes. Members of Congress have the legal right to visit immigration detention facilities without prior notice, in order to conduct [vital oversight](#). Congress made this clear in Appropriations law ([Section 527](#)): “None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available to the Department of Homeland Security by this Act may be used to prevent any of the following persons from entering, for the purpose of conducting oversight, any facility operated by or for the Department of Homeland Security used to detain or otherwise house aliens” and lists “a Member of Congress.” This law is foundational for Congress to effectively carry out its oversight role over a system that is rampant with abuse, gross mismanagement, profiteering driven by inhumane conditions, and impunity.

2. How should members of Congress select which detention center to visit?

Members of Congress may want to visit a facility in their state or district, or a facility in a different state or district where the loved ones of constituents are likely to be held and/or where the national impact of immigration detention is particularly visible. Additionally, NIJC, the ACLU, and DWN can provide recommendations of ICE jails that are in particular need of oversight.

ICE publishes data about ICE detention facilities, in accordance with appropriations reporting requirements, [here](#).

From this data, members of Congress can determine:

a. Which facilities are in my district?

- Open the [spreadsheet](#), look at the “facilities” tab, search according to area of operation or by location

b. Who is detained at a particular jail and which standards govern it?

- Under the “facilities” tab, there are numbers of the average daily population of people detained in each ICE detention facility holding people in detention (ICE does not report on facilities with contracts that are not holding people at the time of reporting)

c. How has a facility performed in its required inspections?

- Under the “facilities” tab, you can see the type of contract arrangement, the type of detention standards, and whether the facility passed its last inspection.

A note about facility contracts and inspections reports: NIJC litigated Freedom of Information Act requests starting in 2015 to obtain ICE contracts and inspection reports. Those documents obtained by NIJC are available at <https://www.immigrantjustice.org/transparency>. In accordance with congressional reporting requirements, ICE started publishing its contracts and inspections on its FOIA e-library, <https://www.ice.gov/foia/library>.

3. What should congressional offices do to prepare ahead of a visit?

In advance of a visit, members of Congress and their staff should meet with local civil rights and human rights advocacy groups, families of detained individuals, legal services organizations, and/or other stakeholders who are familiar with the given facility and the particular concerns of detained individuals, and we are able to help identify stakeholders and facilitate these meetings.

If the visit is announced, members and their staff should provide the facility in advance with the name and alien registration number, (known as an “A-number,” the number assigned to all individuals in the immigration system) of each detained individual with whom they intend to meet. If the visit is unannounced, the visiting delegation should bring the list of names and A numbers with them.

Importantly, members and their staff should bring blank copies of their office’s authorization forms to obtain a signature providing consent to seek and/or share information with ICE about an individual’s case.

4. What should members of Congress do during their visit?

Members of Congress who announce their visit in advance are encouraged to request access to the individuals and physical spaces described below and request the information described below in advance of the visit. For delegations who are engaging in unannounced visits, we recommend arriving at the facility with information requests ready to go and being prepared to ask for follow-up information subsequent to the visit.

a. Who to meet:

Members and their staff should request to speak with the following individuals before, during, or subsequent to any jail visit:

- Facility leadership, including the warden or its equivalent
- ICE leadership with control over the facility
- Medical and mental health staff of the facility
- Immigrants held in detention

b. What to see:

In order to gain a full understanding of the facility, we recommend that visiting delegations request to see each of the following parts of the facility:

- Segregation / medical isolation / special housing unit
- Medical unit
- Kitchen (particularly if unannounced)
- All recreation spaces, including indoor and/or outdoor
- Law library (and request to review what documents and materials are made available to individuals in detention)
- Family and attorney/client visitation areas, including contact and no-contact areas
- Cells and/or dorm areas where individuals in detention sleep each night and spend their days
- Phones used by individuals in detention for contact with family and attorney/client calls

5. What are the next steps after completing an ICE jail visit?

There are many ways in which a member of Congress can leverage their experience ranging from minutes after the visit in front of the ICE jail, to months after the visit on the Senate or House floor.

Oversight steps following a visit can include:

- a. **Press conference or social media live stream** in front of the facility immediately following the visit, with family members of people detained inside. This action will elevate the voices of those most impacted by detention and allow the member of Congress to speak out immediately about the most impactful moments of the visit. Advance planning for a public or live-streamed event outside the facility or a nearby location is particularly encouraged for members who are planning an unannounced visit and may need to protest the facility's decision to deny entry.
- b. **Public statements** on social media and other platforms within 24 hours of the visit, recording what the visiting delegation observed.
- c. **Written statements and/or floor speeches** provide an opportunity for the member of Congress to connect their experience and the stories of individuals they met in the facility with questions about federal immigration policy, in particular the administration's continued unnecessary expansion of the detention system.
- d. **Interventions with local facility operators and ICE local and federal officers** allow members to push for remedial actions by ICE and the facility operator to address problems observed during the visit. Interventions might include:
- Member-level outreach by phone or email to the ICE field office director and/or warden highlighting specific concerns and demanding redress
 - Outreach to ICE headquarters doing the same, if local staff is unresponsive
 - Supporting local service providers' requests for assistance and intervention
- When identifying concerns for ICE or facility operators, it may be helpful for members of Congress and their staff to identify if the concern represents a specific violation of a particular ICE detention standard
- e. **Support for individuals who the visiting delegation met in detention**, such as:
- Provide letters of support to ICE for release on bond or parole
 - Reach out to ICE and/or the facility operator to request specific assistance or amelioration of harms for individuals suffering rights abuses such as inadequate medical or mental health care access
 - Conduct member- or staff-level outreach to ICE in support of requests the individual and/or her attorney has made for prosecutorial discretion such as a stay of removal
- f. **Congressional funding.** NIJC, Detention Watch Network and the ACLU encourage members of Congress to leverage their detention visitation experience to publicly call on their colleagues in Congress to cut DHS's detention and enforcement funding.

6. Who does ICE detain?

People in ICE custody all are in either: 1.) immigration court or appellate proceedings to determine if they can remain lawfully in the United States, or 2) pending removal. Today, the majority of individuals are long-time residents of the United States,¹ including many individuals with pending asylum claims, green cards, and visas. For people who are detained by ICE following interactions with the criminal legal system, ICE detention is separate and apart from any criminal proceedings—and frequently interrupts or undermines the finality of those proceedings as ICE often relies on arrests or charges, over convictions.

As of internal data released June 6, 2025, ICE held [51,302](#) individuals in immigration detention facilities. This marks an increase of more than 11,000 since the start of this Trump administration and a [dramatic growth](#) over the course of decades since the 1980s, when the United States rarely jailed individuals for alleged violations of the civil immigration code.

7. Who benefits from jailing more immigrants?

[Nearly 90%](#) of people in ICE custody are held in facilities run by for-profit, private companies. The private prison company GEO Group, which donated over a million dollars alone to Trump's reelection, [receives approximately \\$1 billion](#) a year in revenue from ICE alone, *half of its total revenue*. [Attorney General Pam Bondi is a former lobbyist](#) for the Geo Group and the “border czar” Tom Homan earned at least [\\$5.000 as a consultant for GEO Group](#) over the two years before he joined Trump's second administration.

The CEO of the other major private prison company CoreCivic, which relies on ICE for [half a billion of revenue a year](#), has said publicly he expects to see the “[most significant growth](#)” in his company's history over the next several years.

8. What standards of care govern ICE detention centers?

No formally binding regulations or statutory provisions govern the standards of care at ICE detention facilities. Although ICE has adopted a various set of detention standards that serve as guidance, they do not require contractors to adopt the most recent standards when it enters into new contracts or contract extensions. The result is a patchwork system in which facilities are subject to differing standards and some are subject to no standards at all.

¹ ICE can also detain individuals who crossed the U.S. border and are referred by Customs and Border Protection (CBP). However, due to an executive order currently challenged in court, the Trump administration has effectively shut out most people who would seek entry at the U.S. border in violation of asylum and child welfare laws. See [RAICES v. Noem](#).

Notably, [solicitation for new contracts issued in April 2025 indicates](#) that the new facilities will be held to less stringent detention standards that are meant only for small local facilities. This means that private prison companies will have few binding requirements regarding conditions of confinement in custody, and will be able to defer to their own procedures for key areas such as environmental health and safety.

These standards include:

- a. [National Detention Standards \(NDS\) 2000](#)
- b. [Performance-Based National Detention Standards \(PBNDs\) 2008](#)
- c. [PBNDs 2011](#)
- d. [NDS 2019](#)
- e. [Family Residential Standards 2020](#)
- f. [Temporary Housing Standards](#)

9. What are the most urgent rights violations occurring in ICE detention?

For decades, non-governmental organizations and DHS OIG have documented persistent rights abuses within ICE detention. [Access to counsel](#) is abysmal, as the sheer transfer of an individual into ICE custody erects near insurmountable barriers for individuals in desperate need of legal representation.

Internal inspection reports written by [DHS's own experts](#) are among the examples of independent findings of:

- “unsafe and filthy” conditions,
- racist abuse and harassment of people in ICE detention,
- negligent medical and mental health care, and
- “barbaric” punishments leveled, often, against those with mental health disorders.

Conditions are particularly alarming for [LGBTQ+ individuals](#), [children](#), and [women](#).

10. What oversight occurs over ICE detention centers?

ICE's inspection process has been deliberately designed to rubber stamp facility compliance with already-compromised standards to keep facilities from closing, no matter the human cost. ICE's [oversight system](#) has failed to prevent persistent abuse and inhumane conditions. When oversight bodies do make timely recommendations to phase down facilities, ICE has rejected or ignored them. The result is a detention system that exacerbates and creates physical and mental health crises, including preventable deaths.

Now, the Trump administration is [dismantling](#) even the limited existing structured oversight of existing and new facilities, including closing the USCIS Ombudsman, Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL), and the Immigration Detention Ombudsman (OIDO). This will cut off the primary avenues for the public to file complaints about DHS policies and practices.

The best way for lawmakers to conduct effective oversight of immigration detention is to visit facilities.

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Appendix 1: Questions to Ask Facility Staff

Visiting delegations should solicit the following information from ICE and facility staff, either in person or in writing before, during or after a visit.

Who is detained at the facility?

- What is the current contract arrangement? What is the current bed rate, how much is the company receiving (if a private contractor)? When did the contract begin, what is the end date?
- What is the facility's total capacity? How many individuals in ICE custody are currently detained at this facility, including a breakdown by gender, nationalities, and language spoken.
- How many individuals currently in the facility were apprehended by ICE in the interior of the country versus the number apprehended at the border or airport?
- For those apprehended in the interior by ICE, how many of them were detained as a result of a judicial or administrative warrant? What are the specific charges and/or convictions against those individuals who came into ICE custody?
- How many people who are members of vulnerable populations are currently detained at the facility, including: pregnant women, individuals who identify as LGBTQ, individuals with serious medical and/or mental health issues, elderly (over 60), youth (under 21), and/or indigenous language speakers?

Governing standards, contract, and monitoring

- What detention standards currently govern the facility?
- What was the date of the last facility inspection? Request a copy of the most recently conducted inspection results.
- Does the contract contain a "Quality Assurance Surveillance Plan," or QASP? If yes, how many, if any, Contract Discrepancy Reports have been submitted by the Contracting Officer's Representative in the previous year? What corrective action plans are in place in response to such Discrepancy Reports? Request a copy of the Contract Discrepancy Reports and subsequent remedial action plans.
- How many waivers of contract requirements has the facility requested from ICE in the past year, and how many of that number have been granted? What standards have been waived? Request a copy of the waiver request and approval or denial.

Medical and mental health care

- How many medical staff, and what level, are included in the staffing plan for the facility? Which of those positions are currently filled? For any vacancies, how long has the position been vacant?

- Who provides medical services at the facility? Is there a subcontractor for health services? What happens when an individual needs services from an outside specialist?
- Who provides mental health services at the facility? What onsite mental health services are available? What treatment plans are offered to individuals with mental health concerns? How often are they assessed?
- How many people with mental health concerns are held in segregation? How long have they been held in segregation? Have they been considered for alternative placement?

Segregation/solitary confinement

- For what reason(s) are people most commonly placed in segregation and for how long (average/median)?
- How many people in the facility are currently in segregation? Request the documented reasons for and length of each placement.
- Request to review any facility policies or training manuals for the use of segregation.
- Are facility staff aware of and trained on the September 2013 ICE Segregation Directive?⁵⁷
- Do people who are in segregation have access to visitation, phone usage and the law library? If so, how often and for how long?

Recreation and programming

- What programs, such as GED or Alcoholics Anonymous classes, religious meetings or pastoral care, are available to individuals in ICE custody? What is the process for accessing any such programs?
- How many hours per day is outside recreation available? How many times per week?
- Is there any recreation that allows for fresh air and sunlight?

Access to legal materials and counsel

- What process must individuals undertake to gain access to the law library? How many hours per week of access are permitted?
- Are legal materials current? Does the law library contain all materials required by the 2011 Performance-Based National Detention Standards?
- What languages are legal materials available in?
- What computer access is available? Are individuals able to save documents securely? Are they able to print documents?
- How many attorney/client visitation rooms are available?
- Is the pro bono platform (a system that allows individuals to make free calls to approved free legal service providers) in place for clients to reach their attorneys via telephone?
- How can detained individuals communicate in a timely manner with their attorneys?
- Are detained individuals allowed to send and receive faxes with their attorneys? What is the procedure?

- Can people in detention photocopy materials, and if so, at what cost?

Complaint and grievance procedures

- What process is available for an individual in detention to file a complaint or grievance?
- Request the number of complaints and grievances submitted each month for the past year, broken down by type of complaint.
- What is the facility's procedure/response time to respond to complaints and grievances?
- How does staff address complaints and concerns from individuals who do not speak English or Spanish?
- Can people who are detained reach the DHS OIG to report problems inside the facility? A sign with the DHS OIG's number should be posted near all phones. Members of Congress should attempt to call the number themselves during the visit, to see if they are able to get through.

Visitation

- Does the facility allow contact visits between detained individuals and their families?
- How frequently is family visitation permitted?
- Before and after a person in immigration detention receives a visit, what is the protocol? Are individuals strip searched?
- Are any visitation groups regularly visiting the facility? If not, have any groups requested to do so and been denied? If so, what was the basis for the denial?

Training for facility staff

- What if any training does the facility provide its staff on working with trauma survivors or vulnerable populations?
- What if any training does the facility provide its staff on working with individuals from different cultures and those who do not speak English?

Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) compliance

- What policies are in place at the facility to ensure compliance with ICE's training and reporting obligations under DHS's PREA regulations issued in 2014?
- What steps are taken following notice of an alleged sexual assault or abuse?
- How are detainees at the facility made aware of their PREA rights? In what languages?

Appendix 2: Questions to individuals in detention

Confidentiality is critical to the ability of members of Congress and their staff to have open and productive conversations with individuals in detention. Members and their staff should be aware that individuals in detention are under significant stress and in most cases are enduring one of the most challenging periods of their life. They also are frequently afraid that speaking with the press or an elected official or other public personality will result in retaliation by ICE or facility guards. For this reason, it is critical that members and their staff insist that they be permitted to speak with individuals on a one-on-one basis, and without any ICE or facility staff in earshot of the conversation. Members and their staff should be prepared to negotiate in order to access a confidential space.

Beginning the conversation

- Members and their staff should begin their conversations with individuals in detention by explaining who they are and the purpose for their visit, and by assuring the individual that the conversation will be held in confidence unless the individual provides specific consent for the member to share. We also recommend using open-ended questions to elicit concerns and questions from detained individuals.

Orientation and understanding of the legal process

- Does the individual understand the reasons why they are in detention and what their rights are in detention?
- Does the individual understand the removal process they are facing?
- What kind of access do they have to an ICE deportation officer to ask questions?
- What kind of language access do non-English speakers have to speak with ICE and/or facility staff, including medical staff? This question may be especially important to ask people who do not speak English or Spanish.

Medical and mental health care

- Does the individual know how to request medical assistance? If they have requested medical care, how promptly were they seen?
- What quality of care the individual received?
- What kind of access to care do non-English and non-Spanish speakers have?
- What is the availability of mental health counseling?
- Does the individual have access to necessary medications?
- What prenatal care is provided for pregnant individuals?
- What dental care is provided?

Conditions generally

- What educational and recreational programs does the individual have access to?
- Describe the cleanliness in the facility and living quarters.

- What kind of religious services are provided? Is the individual able to observe their religious practices?
- What access does the individual have to personal belongings and documents?
- What is the individual's relationship with and treatment by facility staff?
- Does the individual have any safety concerns in detention, including in relation to other individuals?
- What access does the individual have to soap, shampoo, razors, tampons, and other personal hygiene items?
- What type of work programs does the facility use: are they optional or mandatory? Is there any coercion linking privileges to work?

Food

- Describe the quality and nutritional value of food served.
- Describe the quantity of food and portion size.
- Does the facility make accommodations for dietary restrictions?

Abuse

- What is the individual's general feelings regarding their safety? Have they felt threatened?
- Has the individual been subject to mistreatment, harassment, inappropriate touching or other abuse by ICE or facility officers?
- How do ICE or facility staff respond to allegations of harassment, mistreatment or abuse?

Grievance process

- Does the individual have access to and understanding of a grievance process?
- How does ICE and/or facility staff respond to filed grievances?

Solitary confinement/segregation

- Has the individual been placed in segregation, isolated housing, or some other form of solitary confinement?
- Is the individual aware of any documentation regarding their placement in segregation? Was the individual provided any process for review of the decision to place them in segregation?
- Did an individual placed in segregation have access to the law library, recreation, religious services, or other programs during that time?

Phone access

- Does the individual have access to phones?
- How much do phone calls cost?

- Can the individual call attorneys, consulates/embassies, and immigration courts free of cost?
- Can the individual have a private phone call with their attorney?

Interpretation

- Is the individual able to communicate with facility staff in their native language?
- Do individuals have access to interpreters if needed?

Access to legal services

- How frequent and for how long are individuals permitted to use the law library? Are the materials sufficient and user friendly?
- Describe the quality of staff-provided assistance at the library.
- Does the individual have access to their legal documents and evidence for their case?
- Has the individual faced any challenges or obstacles to obtaining, and communicating and/or meeting with an attorney?

Family visitation

- How often are family members permitted to visit?
- What is the nature of the visitation: contact versus no-contact; in-person versus video-teleconferencing?
- What types of searches occur before and after family visits? Are strip searches used?

Appendix 3: What types of facilities does ICE use to detain people?

“Immigration detention” refers to a variety of facilities governed by different types of [contracts](#). Generally, there are ten types of ICE detention facilities and contract arrangements include:

1. **Service Processing Centers (SPCs)** are owned by ICE and are generally operated by contract detention staff. One example is the El Paso Service Processing Center in El Paso, Texas, which has an average daily population of 755 (549 men and 206 women).¹⁶ **Contract Detention Facilities (CDFs)** are owned and operated by private prison companies that contract directly with ICE. One example is the South Texas ICE Process Center in Pearsall, Texas, operated by the private prison company GEO, which has an average daily population of 1,658 people (1,613 men and 45 women).
2. **Non-Dedicated Intergovernmental Service Agreements (IGSAs)** are contracts between local and county jails and ICE allowing for the detention of individuals for immigration purposes within city or county jails. One example is the Joe Corley Processing Center in Conroe, Texas, where ICE utilizes the local jail to hold an average daily population of 811 men.
3. **Dedicated IGSAs (DIGSAs)** are contracts between local governments, ICE, and often a private company, for facilities which house only individuals in ICE custody. One example is the Prince Edward County, Farmville, Virginia, facility,, where the county contracts with ICE but the private prison company Abyon, LLC (formerly Immigration Centers of America) operates the facility, which holds an average daily population of 533 people.
4. **U.S. Marshals Service Intergovernmental Agreement (USMS IGAs)** are facilities operated by the U.S. Marshals Service that ICE also utilizes, usually pursuant to a rider on the Marshal’s contract. One example is the Clay County Detention Center in Indiana, where ICE holds on average 256 people (242 men and 14 women).
5. **U.S. Marshals Service Contract Detention Facilities (USMS CDF)** are U.S. Marshals Services facilities involving a private contractor that ICE utilizes, typically pursuant to a rider on the Marshal’s contract. One example is the Rio Grande Detention Center in Laredo, Texas, operated by GEO Group, which ICE uses to hold an average of 627 people in detention. The Trump administration has been ramping up USMS riders which do not require the same level of notice and transparency as new contracts.
6. **Department of Defense (DOD)** facilities are operated by the U.S. Department of Defense, which ICE uses to detain people. The one current example is the JFT Camp Six located at the U.S. Naval Station in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.. ICE lists JFT Camp Six as the only DOD facility currently in operation, but is reportedly pursuing additional contracts to detain people at military bases.

7. **Migrant Operations Center (MOC)** is a facility located at the U.S. Naval Station in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The Trump administration has additionally held dozens of immigrants and asylum seekers in Camp VI, within the Naval Station's military prison, despite lacking authority to hold migrants in that site.
8. **Bureau of Prisons (BOP)** facilities are operated by the BOP which ICE uses to hold people in ICE custody. One example is the BOP prison in Miami, Florida currently holding an average of 152 people in ICE custody. The Trump administration has been expanding its operations at BOP facilities.
9. **Staging** facilities in some cases involve private contractors and are used by ICE to detain people for less than 72-hours before removal. One example is the Alexandria Staging Facility, located in Alexandria, Virginia, currently holding an average of 320 people in ICE custody.