Immigrant Advocates Seek Immediate Release of People at Heightened Risk of COVID-19 from Notorious Georgia Detention Centers

Lawsuit: Failure to Address Public Health Crisis Risks Community Catastrophe

Atlanta, GA, April 3, 2020 — The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta, with pro bono assistance from the law firm of Kilpatrick Townsend, filed a lawsuit today seeking the immediate release of people held at three immigrant detention centers in south Georgia where they are at great risk of contracting COVID-19 due to their health.

The lawsuit warns of a catastrophe at the privately operated detention centers, including Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia, Folkston ICE Processing Center in Folkston, Georgia and Irwin County Detention Center in Ocilla, Georgia, as well as the surrounding communities, if U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) fails to take meaningful action to safeguard the health of these detained people.

“Despite my very serious conditions, I have not received any special treatment, medical evaluations, or information regarding the coronavirus,” said Joseph Lloyd Thompson, a longtime Georgia resident, who suffers from multiple ailments, including a severe aneurysm in his heart. “In fact, even with this increased risk, they didn’t give me any of my medication from about March 4, 2020 to March 26, 2020. This was really upsetting and stressful because my medication is crucial for controlling my symptoms so that my heart doesn’t become overworked and stressed.”

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of civil detainees with a range of pre-existing conditions that make them especially susceptible to COVID-19, which is highly contagious and known to thrive in environments such as jails and detention centers where people are held in close quarters. The substandard conditions of these three privately operated immigrant detention centers, which have been cited by the federal government in the past for poor hygiene and sanitation and inadequate medical care, only exacerbate conditions favorable for transmission of the virus.

“It is both illegal and unconscionable for ICE to continue to hold these individuals knowing their lives are in greater jeopardy every minute they remain imprisoned under these appalling conditions,” said Rebecca Cassler, an attorney with the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Immigrant Justice Project.

“Even in normal times, incarceration is detrimental to the health of the people locked inside,” said Hillary Li, an attorney with Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta. “That ICE insists on continuing to jail people during a global pandemic, particularly those who already suffer serious illness, is heartless. If ICE waits until COVID-19 is ripping through the facility to release them, it will be far too late.”

The lawsuit can be viewed here: https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/thompson_v.tsoukaris_-habees_petition_and_complaint.pdf

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta (Advancing Justice-Atlanta) is the first legal advocacy nonprofit
dedicated to the civil rights of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in Georgia and the Southeast. Our mission is to protect and promote the civil and human rights of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in Georgia and the Southeast through policy advocacy, legal services, organizing & civic engagement, and impact litigation.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Alabama with offices in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit civil rights organization dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society. For more information, see www.splcenter.org and follow us on social media: Southern Poverty Law Center on Facebook and @splcenter on Twitter.

The SPLC represents immigrants facing deportation in five different detention centers. Learn more about SPLC's Southeast Immigrant Freedom Initiative.

About Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta (formerly Asian American Legal Advocacy Center or AALAC) is the first non-profit law center dedicated to Asian immigrants and refugees (“Asian Americans”) in the Southeast.

Our goal is to engage, educate and empower under-represented Asian Americans to greater civic participation.

We are one of five independent organizations that make up the national Asian Americans Advancing Justice. Together with our affiliates in Chicago, DC, Los Angeles and San Francisco, we bring more than 100 years of collective experience in addressing the civil rights issues faced by Asian Americans and other vulnerable and underserved communities. Visit www.advancingjustice-atlanta.org.