Advocates: Catastrophe Awaits Unless Action is Taken to Protect People Held at South Georgia Immigrant Detention Facilities Amid Pandemic

ICE will bear responsibility for sickness and death

Atlanta, GA, April 10, 2020 — The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta issued the following statement after the denial of their request for a temporary restraining order seeking the immediate release of people at heightened risk of COVID-19 currently held at two south Georgia immigration detention centers.

“These detention centers are ticking time bombs ready to blow if the federal government does not take action immediately,” said Rebecca Cassler, an attorney with the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Immigrant Justice Project. "People are already sick. And between the despicable conditions of these facilities, lack of adequate medical care and the health challenges these people already face, there is little doubt it will soon turn into a complete catastrophe.”

“We are disappointed by the court’s ruling today, but this is not the end. We will keep fighting for our clients’ right to protect themselves from a disease that is rapidly devastating our communities," said Phi Nguyen, Litigation Director with Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta.

Since the lawsuit was filed earlier this week, COVID-19 cases among detained people have been confirmed at both privately operated detention centers named in the lawsuit. They include five cases at Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin and one case at Irwin County Detention Center in Ocilla. What’s more, Stewart Detention Center is the site of 30 suspected cases of COVID-19. Despite confirming these cases in sworn court filings on April 9, 2020, they were not listed on ICE’s published list of confirmed cases in detention centers on April 10, 2020.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of eight civilly detained immigrants with a range of preexisting conditions that make them especially susceptible to severe cases of 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 two 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.

A separate suit has been filed in the Southern District of Georgia for clients detained at Folkston ICE Processing Center in Folkston.

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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.