



ACTIVIST TOOLKIT

FREE PEOPLE FROM ICE DETENTION

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



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GET THE FACTS

27K+

immigrants and asylum-seekers are held in U.S. immigration detention as of July 2021

81%

of ICE detention facilities are run by for-profit prison corporations as of January 2020

19K+

people contracted COVID-19 in immigration detention facilities as of July 2021

870K+

people were summarily expelled at the U.S. southern border under the misuse of the Title 42 public health authority since March 2020



We call on communities to come together, raise their voice, and take action.

Amnesty International USA is calling on activists across the country to come together and take action on urgent issues affecting immigrants and asylum-seekers, which are outlined in Amnesty International USA's new [progress report](#) assessing the Biden administration's record on making the United States a safe refuge.

The society we work towards is one where people support one another and no one is left to fend for themselves. But for tens of thousands of people unjustly locked up in immigration detention, they have been left behind with their lives in danger. Millions of others around the world and at the U.S. southern border have been stuck in limbo without a home, and some at the southern border blocked from even asking for safety.

AIUSA demands President Biden to follow through on his pledge to build a fair and humane immigration system. His promised agenda was a stark contrast to the punitive, cruel, and xenophobic policies of the previous administration, yet the Biden administration has yet to act boldly to undo these harms and explicitly address racism underlying the immigration system.

Whether welcoming immigrants and asylum-seekers in this country, or ensuring that people who seek protection are able to do so in freedom, without detention, this is about who we are, the community we create, and how we choose to treat others.





WHAT'S GOING ON

Barriers to Asylum

Every day, all over the world, people are forced to leave their homes in search of safety someplace else to escape from persecution, torture, other severe human rights abuses, armed conflict, and horrific violence. They may have been targeted because of who they are, what they do, who they love, or what they believe.

Some of them come to the U.S. southern border, where they have right to seek safety and to receive a fair process. **However, people seeking protection have been turned away when they ask for safety at the border or expelled without ever having their claims heard and forced to return to countries where they may be tortured, imprisoned, or even killed.**

Most recently, the Biden administration has chosen to continue the previous administration's policy of recklessly misusing the Title 42 public health authority to block and expel people at the border. Since the pandemic began, hundreds of thousands of people have been summarily expelled, despite objections by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) officials and public health experts. The unlawful use of Title 42 has particularly affected Black immigrants and asylum-seekers. Furthermore, the government's expulsion of families and individuals but not unaccompanied children has resulted in family separation. **There is no public health rationale to treat immigrants and asylum-seekers differently, yet it is causing irreparable harm to them.**



Immigration Detention

As of July, over 27,000 immigrants and asylum-seekers are held in a sprawling network of over 200 immigration detention facilities throughout the country while they fight for their right to seek to stay in the U.S. **The sharp rise in the number of people detained suggests the Biden administration, like its predecessor, will continue to rely on mass detention for people arriving at the border**, particularly when it does stop misusing the public health quarantine to block people at the border.

Though detention is civil, not criminal, and is meant to ensure that people show up to their hearings, in practice, detention facilities look and feel like prisons and punish people for seeking protection here. Spending months or even years behind bars, people in detention do not have easy access to an attorney and are detained far from their loved ones in remote locations, in conditions that are oftentimes abusive and sometimes deadly. **The overwhelming majority of people detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are Black and Brown, both a reflection and perpetuation of systemic racism.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the dangers of detention, with the illness sweeping through the facilities and affecting at least 19,600 people and killing at least nine people in detention as of July.

Many detained families with children came to the U.S. fleeing violence and persecution. While the Biden administration has released all families from long-term detention, **the policy remains on the books** and is funded in the administration's budget proposal for the next fiscal year.

Meanwhile, immigration detention has become a booming business: the vast majority of facilities are run by for-profit corporations, where financial incentives appear to dictate the quality of care people receive. Nearly all others are county jails that contract with the federal government. The largest private prison operators have seen their profits soar over a four-year period into the billions of dollars. Private or public, large numbers of facilities detaining immigrants have been linked to human rights violations – they are notorious for poor treatment, including unsafe and unsanitary conditions, assault and abuse, negligent medical care, and excessive use of solitary confinement.



CALLS TO ACTION

Change is possible, but it's up to the Biden administration to turn rhetoric into concrete action and build an immigration system based on humanity, compassion, and respect, and to put human rights and racial justice at the center.

Specifically, AIUSA is calling on President Biden and Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas to [free people from ICE detention](#), taking immediate steps to:

- review everyone's case with a presumption of liberty, with asylum-seekers and immigrants allowed to live in the community, supported by sponsors and community-based programs operated by nonprofits to assist individuals in navigating the immigration process;
- phase out ICE contracts with private prison companies and county jails;
- end family detention and close all three family detention centers;
- invest in community-based case management programs operated by nonprofits; and
- protect people under their care by halting transfers and providing universal access to COVID-19 vaccines in detention.

We also urge the Biden administration to immediately stop expelling individuals and families under Title 42, rescind the CDC order, implement fair and humane asylum processes that provide meaningful opportunity to ask for protection at the border, act expeditiously to admit 62,500 refugees in the U.S. by October and issue a refugee admissions goal of 125,000 for the next fiscal year, and expand the community sponsorship system, including the launch of a private sponsorship program.



HOW TO TAKE ACTION

PRIORITY – WRITE AN OP-ED OR LETTER TO THE EDITOR (LTE)

Your voice has the power to tell your community leaders, members, and neighbors why welcoming people is important to you, and why it should matter to them. Write an op-ed or LTE on why we need to free people from immigration detention and welcome immigrants and asylum-seekers in our communities. See our *“Tips for Writing Op-eds and LTEs”* and *“Messaging Frames”* in the resources below. Make sure to email campaigns@aiusa.org to let us know you are interested in submitting an op-ed or LTE. Our team is available to help with drafts, reviews, and to amplify your piece on AIUSA channels if published.

NEXT UP – ONLINE ACTIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Even the smallest action can make a difference in people’s lives. [Take quick online actions](#) directed at the officials who have the power to transform our immigration system to treat people with compassion and respect for their human rights. Then, personalize tweets and directly tag the government targets – from @POTUS and @SecMayorkas to your [members of Congress](#) – with the demands messaged in our actions and the hashtag #WelcomeWithDignity. See our list of *“Online Actions”* and *“Social Media Guide”* in the resources below.

LASTLY – COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Talking to members of your community about human rights violations is a powerful way to raise awareness and inspire action. Engage your community in a conversation on how we must replace the current immigration detention system with an immigration system that treats people with dignity, fairness, and respect, as well as around other refugee and migrant rights issues. Conversations around the path forward should always be guided by the affected communities, so make sure to uplift the voices of anyone who may be directly impacted by immigration issues and policies. See our *“Messaging Frames”* and *“Guidance on Community Conversations”* in the resources below.



RESOURCES

TIPS FOR WRITING OP-EDS AND LTES

ORIGINAL - Are you writing something that's fresh? Find a new way to make an argument and make sure that you are writing original content and not just quoting from what's already out there.

PERSONAL - Why are you providing this point of view? Don't be afraid to offer personal stories and insights in the context of your own background. You could also coauthor a piece with someone who is directly affected.

TIMELY - Why now? Finding a good news hook is often the key to getting a piece published. Think about why this piece is relevant now and see if you can work a current event into your piece. You could tie to recent developments being reported in the news around ICE detention.

INFORMATIVE - Did the reader learn something? Make sure the reader comes away from your piece knowing more than they did before. Op-eds aren't just a chance to rant or rave on an issue; they should enrich the reader's knowledge.

CONTROVERSIAL/COUNTERINTUITIVE - Are people arguing about this issue? Is your take on this unexpected? Writing about a hot issue, arguing an unexpected point of view, or coauthoring a piece with someone who the reader might not expect will help your piece stand out.

Op-eds and LTEs are a great way to reshape the public conversation and affect policy. If you want to write a piece that will add to the conversation of immigration detention and get published, see if it meets the OPTIC criteria.

It's important to stick to this criteria. If we're trying to pitch an op-ed, we don't want to merely reiterate things that have happened in the news or simply restate our position on a topic. Whenever possible, we want to lift up personal examples or affected people's voices. At all times, we need to ask ourselves: what story am I trying to tell? Is an op-ed the best way to do that, or should I consider an LTE?

LTEs are a great (and quick) way to respond to articles, rather than introducing a new argument in an op-ed. If you

see that one of your local publications has published an article recently on asylum-seekers and immigrants, this is an opportunity to write an LTE. Your best chance of getting your letter published is when it's in response to something that has been printed. Make sure that you specifically identify the article you are responding to in your LTE and that you make your argument succinctly.

For your op-ed or LTE, include your full name and contact information, and you could also note that you are writing as an Amnesty International member or supporter. If the outlet is interested, they may write back asking you to verify your identity and confirm that the op-ed is exclusive to their publication.

Structuring your op-ed

Idea or Lede: Where you draw your audience in and make clear what your op-ed is about. You can be witty or personal - just try to have a compelling entry into your piece. Find a way to use current news here to ensure that op-ed editors and readers will understand why you're writing this now. Just try to avoid making it too dry by repeating something that people already know, or by being too cliché ("Imagine you're..." is a major trope to avoid in advocacy writing).

Argument: Your overall thesis should go here. Have a strong few sentences or paragraphs here that will let the reader know what your point of view is. Use the following paragraphs, or "evidence" to explain why you're right.

Evidence: Try to give up to three real-life stories and/or data that will feed into your overall argument.

Wind back to original assertion: Having laid out the evidence, make the case for why this supports your idea or call to action.

Conclusion: Circle back to your lede.

Important directions and tips

- Email campaigns@aiusa.org to let us know you are interested in submitting an op-ed or LTE. Our team is available to help with drafts, reviews, where to consider pitching, and amplification on AIUSA channels once your piece gets published.
- When thinking of where you might submit your piece, local newspapers are your best bet. You could also consider niche publications that might be more open to a specific angle than others.
- Make sure to closely follow the outlet's guidelines. Look online for the publication's specific rules for op-ed lengths and LTE submission guidelines, and look at op-eds or LTEs from the publication to get a sense of the style. Op-eds are generally 650-800 words and LTEs are generally between 100-250 words long.
- If you're making a call to action, make sure to do it in a way that doesn't sound too much like an email appeal, which can be a bit too specific. Above all, editors are interested in telling a story for their readers, not providing a platform for an organization to advertise itself. Take care when working this line.
- When working to publish an op-ed, it's critical that you submit it to only one news outlet at a time.
- If you don't get a timely response (usually at least 24 hours), email to let that outlet know you are moving on to another publication.
- If we try three different outlets without a piece being picked up, we may fall back and see if the tactic still makes sense, or if we need to adjust the piece.
- Let us know at campaigns@aiusa.org if your piece gets published, and amplify it on social media if you have an account, tagging @amnestyusa and #WelcomeWithDignity.

MESSAGING FRAMES

Change is possible

- Our communities have been at the forefront of welcoming newcomers for decades
- We have seen how communities can come together – often without federal or state resources – to welcome people

We can make progress, if we start now

- We have seen the effect of caring for one another and we have seen that caring works better than punishment
- Strong communities help people realize their potential and welcome others who also want to contribute to make society better for all
- We must ask more of our government and for our elected leaders to heed our calls

We need all our communities to work together to build support systems so no one feels alone

- The society we work towards is one where people support one another and no one is left to fend on their own
- Everyone should have adequate access to attorneys, to appropriate interpreters, and fair access to courts just as United States citizens do
- Whether welcoming immigrants and people seeking safety in this country or ensuring that people who have sought safety are able to do so in freedom, without detention, this is about who we are and how we can, and will, treat others in the years to come

Diversity makes our communities better

- Our new neighbors, colleagues, classmates, friends, families, and faith community members and leaders enrich our communities and make them stronger
- People must not be defined by where they were born but by who they are

Not one more person should be detained for seeking safety solely because of their immigration status

- We are working to build an immigration system based on humanity, compassion, and respect
- Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity, respect, and fairness, no matter their immigration status
- The vicious system of unjust detentions must end
- Fears, anxieties, and insecurities can no longer be the driving force of our immigration policies. Love must be the driving force
- Detention is not a solution – the presumption for anyone coming to this country must be liberty and safety
- We need a system that is fair, where people are given the tools they need to successfully navigate their immigration court proceedings
- There are well-established community-based programs to support people and compassionate, proven alternatives to detention that are efficient, effective, and humane such as case management programs



ONLINE ACTIONS

- Email President Biden and Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas calling on them to [free immigrants and asylum-seekers from ICE detention](#)
- Contact your members of Congress and urge them to pass the [Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act](#) and [Freedom for Families Act](#), two critical bills that would transform the current system of immigration detention



SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDE

Twitter

- Instead of shamefully continuing border expulsions and mass detention like his predecessor, @POTUS has the opportunity to reassert US commitment to people seeking safety. @SecMayorkas must restore access to asylum and free people now: bit.ly/FreePeopleNow #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC]
- Over 27,000 people are locked up by @ICEgov, a 95% jump from February. Many of them are Black & Brown immigrants and asylum-seekers. @POTUS @SecMayorkas must course correct: stop mass detention & free people from detention. bit.ly/FreePeopleNow #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC]
- We need the Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act to transform our immigration system to treat people with the dignity & respect they deserve and that human rights demand. I call on @[your members of Congress handles] and @POTUS to pass this bill: bit.ly/PassDignity #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC]
- Children should be able to grow up and live in freedom with their families and communities as they pursue the right to seek safety here. I call on @[your members of Congress handles] and @POTUS to #EndFamilyDetention: bit.ly/Freedom4Families #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC]

Facebook

- Instead of shamefully continuing border expulsions and mass detention like his predecessor, @POTUS has the opportunity to reassert US commitment to protect the rights, and lives, of people seeking safety. @homelandsecurity must stop endangering and criminalizing people for asking for protection. Restore access to asylum and free people now: bit.ly/FreePeopleNow #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC]
- There are over 27,000 people locked up by ICE – a 95% jump from February. The majority of them are Black and Brown immigrants and asylum-seekers who continue to bear the brunt of immigration policies that block and criminalize people for seeking safety. Meanwhile, immigration detention has become a booming business, with the largest private prison operators who run detention facilities seeing profits soar into the billions of dollars. @POTUS and @homelandsecurity must immediately course correct: stop mass detention and free people from detention now. bit.ly/FreePeopleNow #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC]
- Tens of thousands of people are still unjustly locked up when they should be free. We need the Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act now, to transform our immigration detention system to treat people with the dignity and respect they deserve and that human rights demand. Join calls to #WelcomeWithDignity by urging your members of Congress and @POTUS to sign this critical bill into law: bit.ly/PassDignity [GRAPHIC]
- Children should be able to grow up and live in freedom with their families and communities as they pursue the right to seek safety here. I call on my members of Congress and @POTUS to #EndFamilyDetention: bit.ly/Freedom4Families #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC]

Instagram

- Instead of shamefully continuing border expulsions and mass detention like his predecessor, @POTUS has the opportunity to reassert US commitment to protect the rights, and lives, of people seeking safety. @dhsgov must stop endangering and criminalizing people for asking for protection. Click on the link in bio to call on the administration to restore access to asylum and free people now. #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC] [link for bio: bit.ly/FreePeopleNow]
- There are over 27,000 people locked up by @dhsgov – a 95% jump from February. The majority of them are Black and Brown immigrants and asylum-seekers who continue to bear the brunt of immigration policies that block and criminalize people for seeking safety. Meanwhile, immigration detention has become a booming business, with the largest private prison operators who run detention facilities seeing their profits soar into the billions of dollars. @POTUS immediately must course correct: stop mass detention and free people from detention. Click on the link in bio to take action. #WelcomeWithDignity [GRAPHIC] [link for bio: bit.ly/FreePeopleNow]
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GUIDANCE ON COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Engaging people at your conversation or event

- Share the community agreements below, or modify them to meet the needs of your community, to create a safe space for talking about global and domestic issues that may be new, challenging, or personally affecting depending on each other's experience.
 - Manage your biases and behaviors
 - Inclusion is intentional – listen for different perspectives and ask questions with a sense of curiosity instead of judgment
 - Manage speaking time and make space for different voices
 - Respect and learn from different perspectives
- Understand the difference between intent and impact (assume good intent and take responsibility for your impact)
- Listen to understand, rather than to just respond
- Have everyone introduce themselves. Start with an icebreaker i.e., what do you love about our city or town?
- Discuss challenges that immigrants and asylum-seekers face across the world and in the U.S.
- [Take actions](#) together on immigration detention
- Take photos of your event and post them to social media using the hashtag #WelcomeWithDignity and tagging @amnestyusa

Talking with immigrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees about their backstories

- **Before the conversation:** Do some research before meeting so you can be culturally aware and appropriate. If at all possible, before you meet, learn the history and customs of their home country, faith, and ethnicity so the conversation is culturally appropriate. Be sure to follow their lead in how they address you, whether they want to shake hands or make frequent eye contact. Don't assume that hugs or pats on the shoulder will be appropriate, even with the warmest intentions.
- **Starting the conversation:** Make a point to establish an empathetic connection that builds on identifying mutual experiences and interests and understandings. These may seem like innocuous questions but have a major impact on forging connections and empathy: Where do they live? Have they visited local parks/attractions in their community yet? What are their hobbies? What kind of music do they enjoy? Any recent films or books they enjoyed or would recommend? How have they found the weather in your area recently?
- **Following their lead:** For many people, the common instinct when meeting someone and getting to know them is to ask about their backstory. We want to create connections and have meaningful conversations. That is a great instinct. It also may not be the best way to introduce yourself when talking with an immigrant or someone who came here seeking safety. Questions about past experiences, such as *"Why did you flee your country?"* or *"Why are you here?"* might retraumatize them. Questions that only focus on the harm that happened to them risks also reducing them to one identity – that of an immigrant or someone who sought safety and protection when actually, that part of their life is only a fraction of their story. Make sure to see the whole person – just as everyone wants to be seen. They are a person like you,

with ambitions and concerns and everyday observations to share; someone's child and someone's friend or partner; a worker; a person with hobbies. All of this is advised not because immigrants or people seeking safety are vulnerable or fragile, but because we want to respect the person. Just as any of us who have survived abuse would not want to be spoken to only about that abuse or asked about it again and again.

- **Responding to what is being shared:** If they choose to share their immigration stories with you, either about their journey here or the current challenges they face, listen and give space to their experience. Consider validating their experience without taking over and making it your own. Most of all, be friendly and open and welcoming. They are your neighbor.
 - You could say: I can't imagine how hard that must be/have been for you; I appreciate you sharing that with me. It means so much; This sounds like an incredibly tough time; What helped you the most in this process? How have you found people most helpful?
 - Do not say: *"Everything happens for a reason"* or *"God works in mysterious ways"* – you don't know their faith, and there is no good reason to experience trauma; *"I know exactly how you feel... [sharing your own experience.]"* – while you may have experienced trauma of your own, or migrated from another country, unless you are someone who fled from violence or persecution, you may not know how that person feels; *"Thank goodness we/the resettlement agency/the United States is here to help you."* – they are not asking to be saved. They are independent adults and, while they may need support, they might not find this language reassuring; *"Well, at least you have [your health/a home/a job.]"* – just like anyone else who has experienced trauma, people seeking safety deserve your empathy, not your advice.