

A few weeks ago, members of our Steering Committee – John Curry, Rose Marie Manger, Nancy Miller, and Lori Sackler - visited the Bergen County jail to learn about the living conditions for immigrant detainees. Bergen County Sheriff Anthony Cureton and Warden Steven Ahrendt hosted the 90-minute visit.

Since 2002, Bergen County has had a federal contract to house people who allegedly violated federal immigration laws. Currently 374 of the county's inmates -- over half the jail's population -- are adult immigrants in that situation. These detainees have active cases that might result in deportation to their countries of origin. They come from all continents but Antarctica.

We learned the following during our visit:

- The jail seemed spotlessly clean and the staff pleasant.
- The jail has medical and dental facilities.
- Detainees have access to a law library, as well as books/magazines for recreational reading.
- Detainees can check out laptops to access email and the internet. Since inmates must pay each email, some can't afford this service. For many, the only income source is work in the cafeteria or laundry, which pays \$1.25/ day.
- Most detainees were apprehended in other states so many aren't visited by friends or family. When they do have visitors, communication is via a telephone from the other side of a security window. Some ICE detention centers in other jails in NJ, like the one in Essex County, don't separate detainees from their visitors.

What can we do to help?

Bergen Indivisible for Democracy recommends the following community actions:

- Urge the sheriff's office to expedite plans to allow detainees to have "contact visits," i.e., to talk without the plate-glass barrier.
- Volunteer to visit a detainee at the Bergen County ICE detention center. These visits are a tremendous moral support for isolated detainees. For info, contact the group that conducts regular volunteer trainings and coordinates the visits: First Friends of New Jersey and New York at info@firstfriendsnjny.org or 908-965-0455. They also need donations to support their advocacy work. See firstfriendsnjny.org.
- Urge the county to review the costs for housing ICE detainees to determine if there are surplus funds that can be dedicated to providing supplemental legal, medical and mental health services for detainees.
- Finally, reach out to your congressional representatives to change a national policy that incarcerates tens of thousands of immigrants, many fleeing violence

and human rights abuses in their countries. Ask them to stand firm in their support for NJ's immigrant-friendly policies, like the Attorney General's Immigrant Trust Directive. For example, if you are in district 9, you can contact Rep. Pascrell's office to commend him for opposing budget increases for ICE.

We hope you will get involved to help.

Warm regards,

Lori Sackler,
BID President