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“A Living Hell”: Detained Immigrants Allege Racism, Assault, Retaliation, and Medical Abuse at New York Jail

*Immigrant Rights Organizations File a Homeland Security Civil Rights Complaint
Against Orange County Correctional Facility in Goshen, NY*

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February 17, 2022, Goshen, N.Y. – Six organizations filed a [complaint](#) with the Department for Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, based on the firsthand accounts of ten detained people, calling for an investigation into ongoing racist abuse, medical neglect, violent retaliation, punitive solitary confinement, COVID-19 negligence, religious discrimination and overall intolerable conditions at the Orange County Correctional Facility (OCCF) in Goshen, New York.

Filed by Envision Freedom Fund, Catholic Charities Community Services – Archdiocese of New York, For the Many, Freedom for Immigrants, New York University School of Law Immigrant Rights Clinic and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, the complaint includes direct testimony recounting incidents of violence and mistreatment this year, part of a longstanding pattern of abuse. People detained at OCCF describe a culture of blatantly racist, dehumanizing treatment and an environment of deplorable conditions and access to medical care in violation of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) own protocols. They further describe a culture of fear, where immigrants are routinely retaliated against and placed in punitive isolation for speaking out and advocating for their rights.

Black and Latinx immigrants report disparate treatment by officers and racist and anti-immigrant slurs. “My experience living here has been one of racism and mistreatment,” said “**Andres**,” a person detained at OCCF using a pseudonym due to fear of retaliation. “The officers here treat us like animals. . . . They have a hatred for Hispanic and Black people. . . . They lock us up in our cell all the time without any reason. . . . They harass us and put us in segregation. There is a group of officers that are especially racist, but all of the officers are responsible.”

Although OCCF officials claim that they screen social media content for extremism in hiring staff, officers named in the complaint as violating immigrants’ civil rights have overtly racist and/or anti-immigrant statements in their public social media, including one officer who appears to be affiliated with multiple “nazikommando” email addresses.

People at OCCF who speak out against their treatment and the facility's conditions are met with violent retaliation and solitary confinement. Immigrants, who already spend most of their waking hours in isolation, locked up in their cells alone, described being locked in for additional hours, days and up to a week for arbitrary, retaliatory reasons.

After receiving a written warning that should not have yielded any additional discipline, said "**Agustin**," also a pseudonym, "[an officer] left me locked in [my cell] the rest of the night during his shift, and the entire next day while he was on duty. There wasn't anything written down. It was just a personal punishment, not formally recorded in a disciplinary log."

Immigrants described how those who make complaints and speak up are targeted for increased harassment and violence from OCCF officers. In one incident on January 1, 2022, several immigrants were subjected to a retaliatory five-day solitary confinement punishment for attempting to exercise their First Amendment rights. The group requested to speak to a sergeant about an officer who was subjecting them to particularly consistent racist abuse. But the group was met with violence: as many as twenty officers yelled at and shoved the men, and then at least six officers attacked an unresisting immigrant. The officers tackled, pepper sprayed, kicked, punched, handcuffed and dragged him away while he cried for help.

In another incident corroborated by multiple individuals, a mentally and cognitively disabled man who suffers chronic suicidality was kicked, beaten and handcuffed by at least seven officers and then punished with weeks of solitary confinement. This attack marked the culmination of months of targeted harassment by the guards, seemingly in response to the man's filing of grievances and litigation against the jail.

"The people detained in the Orange County jail are risking their lives to demand protection of their dignity and human rights. Holding the jail and ICE accountable for addressing immediate health and safety issues is the absolute minimum detained people are owed," said **Tania Mattos, Director of Advocacy and Policy at Envision Freedom Fund**. "The conditions and abuse that people are experiencing at Orange County are endemic to the entire immigration detention system. We need to end this dehumanizing, violent system in favor of policies that allow people to remain free in their communities while resolving their immigration cases with access to community-based resources as needed."

"ICE and the Biden Administration continue to ignore the abuses occurring inside its detention centers, causing tremendous risk to the health, safety, and dignity of immigrants," said **Sophia Genovese, Pro Bono Supervising Attorney, Immigrant & Refugee Services at Catholic Charities Community Services**. "From Orange County Jail to detention centers in the Deep South and at the southern border, ICE continues to terrorize immigrants in its facilities and out in our communities. This lack of accountability for ICE's abuses underscores the need to abolish immigration detention in New York state and across the country."

“It’s time Orange County Jail is held accountable for their actions and releases our community members so that they can reunite with their families while allowing people their due process,” said **Vanessa Cid, Community Organizer at For the Many.**

Immigrants described being treated by medical staff and officers at OCCF like “animals.” The complaint details several instances of egregious and dehumanizing medical negligence, with regular lapses in prescriptions, ignored requests for medical attention, and inadequate and inappropriate screening and care for urgent issues and chronic conditions. Independent medical providers also allege that OCCF fails to provide consistent access to outpatient care, which puts detained people at risk of fatal harm. People in detention further allege that medical treatment is withheld as a form of retaliatory abuse, and multiple detained people suffering psychological distress have been placed in medical isolation, a form of solitary confinement.

“ICE detention threatens the lives and health of the people in immigration facilities and jails,” said **Dr. Kate Sugarman, board certified family medicine physician and Steering Committee member of NYLPI’s volunteer Medical Providers Network.** “COVID-19 has further exacerbated the health crisis in detention; as a physician, I am deeply concerned by the inadequate medical care and dangerous conditions in these facilities that continue to cause serious harm to people’s physical and emotional health.”

COVID-19 has continued to spread in the facility, as OCCF and ICE continue to violate basic safety protocols at the jail. The appalling conditions and lack of sanitation and cleaning supplies—worsened by expired food, malnutrition and insufficient clothing and bedding—exacerbate the spread of COVID-19 in the prison setting.

“They are feeding us like animals,” said **“Moises,”** a pseudonym. “The shower water is so hot that it makes our hair fall out and dries up our skin. . . . There are also dust particles in the air. When we take off our clothes, we see the dust coated all over our body and clothes. . . . Sometimes the air conditioner is on very high, and it gets very cold. . . . Some of the people here are over the age of 60. They are so cold[,] they’re just shivering.”

In addition to calling for an investigation by the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, the groups urge ICE to terminate its Intergovernmental Services Agreement with OCCF; remove the specific officers named by people in detention as engaged in racist, retaliatory and/or otherwise abusive behavior from any position where they exercise power over detained people; and release everyone who remains in the jail back into the community.

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