



Envision Freedom Fund

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**Testimony by Envision Freedom Fund submitted to the New York City Council's  
Committee on Immigration Regarding New York State Immigration Detention Centers**

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**Felipe Cortes, detained at Orange County for 12 months**

My name is Felipe Cortes.

I was detained at Orange County for 12 months.

I was freed on December 8, 2021, exactly one year from the date I first arrived at Orange.

Thank you to the city council for the opportunity to share my experience with you today.

There are so many things I want to share with you but the most important topic I wish to address is the lack of medical care at Orange.

It is one of the most important things that I hope will help my comrades who are still at Orange.

There are many issues with access to medication. Many people who suffer from illnesses do not receive adequate care or do not receive treatment. For some people, they authorize treatment but then those people are not administered their medications properly.

This is something that I experienced.

I suffer from two chronic conditions that require daily medications: high blood pressure and stomach gastritis.

They always failed to provide me with my medication, about two or three times a week, so the treatment did not have much effect.

They have two schedules to give people their medication: the morning and the afternoon.

I worked in the kitchen from 3:00AM to 10:00AM.

They would come to the unit with their cart and the individuals who were there could pick up their medication.

Since I was in the kitchen area, many times the officer on duty would have to call them about my medication but they never wanted to do their job and would tell me, “When you go to the unit, you can get your medication” or “you can take it at night”

When I got to the unit or waited until night the nurses would tell me “You have to take it in the morning. Right now, we cannot give it to you because it is not your scheduled time.” And one day goes by, two, three days and the same situation continues.

When I went days without taking my medication, I would feel dizzy from the blood pressure. And with the gastritis, I suffered from a lot of stomach pain.

I always had virtual meetings with my Brooklyn Defenders social worker, Meg. In all of my conversations with her I, unfortunately, had to tell her my issues and complaints. She always had to constantly call the jail to advocate for me.

There is also a lack of adequate mental health services. The staff are not well prepared. I felt more support from my Brooklyn Defenders social worker, Meg, than anything they provided at Orange.

When you filled out an application for mental health services all they would say is “it is just stress, make sure to drink more water and to sleep more.”

That is not what you want to hear.

We wanted and needed therapy, especially with everything that was going on with the pandemic.

We hoped for a program that would help distract our minds.

Thank you for the space and for the support. I make a plea to all the community leaders, to the defenders, and to the city council. I don't want to say that this is a battle because it is not. We simply just want a change and I think that change is just and necessary for everyone who is inside Orange.

## **Felipe Cortes, detenido en Orange durante 12 meses**

Mi nombre es Felipe Cortes.

Estuve detenido en el condado de Orange durante 12 meses.

Fui liberado el 8 de diciembre de 2021, exactamente un año después de la fecha en que llegué por primera vez a Orange.

Gracias al concejal por la oportunidad de compartir mi experiencia con ustedes hoy.

Hay tantas cosas que quiero compartir con ustedes, pero el tema más importante que deseo

compartir es sobre la falta de atención médica en Orange.

Es una de las cosas más importantes que espero ayude a mis compañeros que todavía están en Orange.

Hay muchos problemas con el acceso a los medicamentos. Muchas personas que padecen de enfermedades no reciben la atención adecuada o no reciben tratamiento. Para algunas personas, le autorizan el tratamiento, pero luego a esas personas no se les administran sus medicamentos adecuadamente.

Esto es algo que yo mismo viví.

Sufro de dos condiciones crónicas que requieren medicamentos diarios: presión alta y gastritis estomacal.

Siempre fallaron en darme mis medicamentos, unas dos o tres veces por semana, por lo que el tratamiento no tuvo mucho efecto.

En Orange, tienen dos horarios para darle a la gente sus medicamentos: la mañana y la tarde.

Pero yo trabajaba en la cocina de 3 de la mañana a 10 de la mañana.

Venían a la unidad con su carrito y las personas que estaban allí podían recoger su medicamento.

Como yo estaba en el área de la cocina, muchas veces el oficial de turno tenía que llamarlos sobre mi medicamento, pero nunca querían hacer su trabajo y me decían: "Cuando vayas a la unidad, puedes obtener tu medicamento" o "puedes tomarlo por la noche"

Cuando llegaba a la unidad o esperaba hasta la noche, las enfermeras me decían: "Tienes que tomarlo en la mañana. Ahorita no te lo puedo dar porque no es tu hora". Y pasa un día, dos, tres días y sigue la misma situación.

Cuando paso días sin tomar mi medicamento, me siento mareado por la presión; y con la gastritis sufría mucho dolor de estómago.

Siempre tuve reuniones virtuales con mi trabajadora social de Brooklyn Defenders, Meg. En todas mis conversaciones con ella, desafortunadamente, tuve que contarle mis problemas y quejas. Ella siempre tenía que llamar constantemente a la cárcel.

También hay una falta de servicios de salud mental adecuados. El personal no está bien preparado. Sentí más apoyo de mi trabajadora social de Brooklyn Defenders, Meg, que de todo lo que me brindaron en Orange.

Cuando uno completa una solicitud para los servicios de salud mental, todo lo que decían era "es solo estrés, asegúrate de beber más agua y dormir más".

Eso no es lo que uno quiere oír.

Queríamos y necesitábamos terapia. Esperamos un programa que ayude a distraer nuestras mentes.

sobre todo, con todo lo que estaba pasando con la pandemia.

Gracias por el espacio y por el apoyo. Hago un llamado a todos los líderes comunitarios, a los defensores y al concejal. No quiero decir que esto es una batalla porque no lo es. Simplemente queremos un cambio y creo que ese cambio es justo y necesario para todos los que están dentro de Orange.

### **Ambien Mitchell, Post-Release Coordinator**

Good afternoon. My name is Ambien Mitchell and I am the Post-Release Coordinator at Envision Freedom Fund, formerly Brooklyn Community Bail Fund. I provide reentry support to people leaving ICE detention. I have worked with many people detained at Orange County Jail over the years, and a dear friend of mine is detained there as I speak. It is his voice that I wish were present here in person today, along with all other voices of those suffering in anguish and despair in that jail.

The day to day tasks of my work consist of listening to the myriad atrocities detained people have endured and supporting them in addressing their subsequent emergent needs, overwhelmingly related to medical attention and mental health care. It is my job to help them seek medical treatment for conditions which went untreated in ICE custody, finish treatment for conditions which went halfway treated, or at worst, have corrective treatment done to counteract harm caused by the medical “care” in ICE jail. I support them in beginning to rebuild their lives and their physical and mental health. People leave detention deeply traumatized, often needing weeks, months, or longer to recover to a point where they can simply walk down the street without feeling an overwhelming fear of being followed, surveilled, or rearrested.

The toll ICE detention takes on one’s medical and mental health is immense and sometimes irreversible. Those detained at Orange County are subject to guards who have hateful, racist outbursts, and are verbally and physically abusive. Some guards have reacted with vitriolic anti-Blackness and xenophobia when hearing detained people speaking to each other in their indigenous dialect. Those overheard greeting each other and exchanging pleasantries have been subsequently harassed and punished. The food is inedible and causes significant digestive issues. One recently released man told me “it stays in my stomach for eight days,” Medical care is negligent at best and actively harmful at worst. One man was released from Orange County Jail in the winter wearing sandals, nearly completely unable to walk due to an infection in his toes; he explained that one nail-clipper is shared amongst 60 detained people. My friend who remains detained today put in multiple requests to go to the infirmary to seek medical care for a chronic health condition. He only received attention after collapsing - multiple times. Those detained at Orange County Jail have nearly no agency to protect themselves either from the guards’ abuse,

nor from disease. After the holidays, one person told me that he heard the guards joking amongst themselves. One of them had tested positive for COVID and was back at work three days later. There is absolutely no care for the health or safety of those in ICE's custody at Orange - or any detention center.

Seeing firsthand the horrific impacts of detention on human beings, their families, and communities, I sincerely beg of you to heed our calls for releases. Please do not prolong their suffering – help us release those detained and close Orange County Jail today. Thank you.

### **Rosa Santana, Bond Director**

My name is Rosa Santana. I am the Bond Director at Envision Freedom Fund (formerly Brooklyn Community Bail Fund). In my role, I established a hotline that receives calls from various detention centers around the U.S., including Orange County Jail. During those calls, we document complaints, especially those related to human rights violations and conditions of the jails/detention centers. I also receive letters from people in detention who share their experiences of racism, abuse, and neglect by the jail. Prior to joining Envision Freedom, I was the Program Director of First Friends of New Jersey and New York (“First Friends”). First Friends also operated a helpline that immigrants in detention could call to seek help and support. Through these phone calls, letters, visits, and jail inspections/tours, I have been meeting and speaking with people in immigration detention in local jails and prisons in the New York and New Jersey area since 2010.

I have spoken with people detained at Orange County Correctional Facility (“OCCF”) for the last two years. I have also toured OCCF along with other advocates seven years ago. Unlike some of the other local jails in the region with immigration contracts, OCCF does not hold regular opportunities for inspections and tours. Two weeks ago I contacted the NY ICE field office requesting a tour of the facility; our request was denied.

OCCF is located in Goshen, New York, a remote place and difficult to get to. Detention itself is isolating. People in OCCF detention report feeling disconnected, as their families cannot visit them because the facility is so far away. I also have heard from detained community members that they hardly ever had contact with their ICE officers, as they did not often visit the facility. Detainees are unable to get updates of their cases, report abuses or ask questions.

People in detention at OCCF also report enduring racist treatment, and describe limited communication between staff members and the population. The staff mostly speak English, creating misunderstandings and meeting them with hostility. This all makes it hard for people inside who do not speak English to express their concerns.

Essential hygiene products, such as toilet tissue and toothpaste, are often denied. If they request

such essentials or complain about their lack, they are often locked in the “box” for days. The box (solitary confinement) are single cells with little or no meaningful contact with others. They are locked in 23 hours a day and all their privileges are suspended such as visits and phone access.

Around December 2021, we received reports that people detained at OCCF were being given five minutes to eat; if they don't eat within that time, their food is taken away and thrown in the garbage can. They are being punished for everything and anything, and often their punishment is to lock them in their cells without food for the rest of the day.

Envision Freedom provides books and commissary funds to people in detention. In the last couple of weeks, we have seen an increase in returned books; we are being informed that books are returned because the recipients are in isolation. Instead of holding the books, OCCF is refusing them.

Medical care is one of the main topics of the complaints we receive at Envision Freedom. We know someone who has submitted more than 200 pages of complaints throughout the past six months trying to get medical attention. Every time, he is told to submit another request, and he has still not received medical care. OCCF is unable to guarantee the health and safety of incarcerated and detained people, particularly amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am in touch with several community members who were transferred from Hudson County Correctional Facility to OCCF. They describe a feeling of torture at OCCF. Some of them have expressed fear of losing their lives for not receiving medical care. They have also said that officers lack empathy and treat them as not human.

Bonds have increased from 2021 to 2022. At the beginning of the year, we were paying relatively low bonds, in the range of \$1,500 to \$4,000. After transfers started happening, bonds for people at OCCF went as high as \$20,000. \$10,000 is the most common bond amount Envision Freedom has been paying for community members. Last week we posted a \$20,000 bond for a 19-year-old detained in this facility. These bond amounts are unjust; immigrant families work very hard to support themselves. Most immigrant families cannot afford them, so their loved ones stay lingering in detention due to lack of funds.

OCCF handles releases poorly. We rely on Uber or Lyft rides to pick up released community members. The facility usually releases people around 1 or 2 p.m., but sometimes even later than that. After 3 p.m., it is nearly impossible to find an Uber or Lyft driver in that area. We have to try for hours to get a driver.

Overall I can state that from all the complaints that I have received from community members, this facility lacks basic services. Based on my experience, my direct knowledge of this facility,

and what I have learned from conversations between detained community members, I am highly concerned with the jail's conditions and how they treat detained community members. The lack of essential hygiene products during a pandemic should not be happening, and this shows in the recent COVID-19 outbreaks. The sense of desperation and fear from people detained in this facility is something we cannot ignore. People should not be caged in a place where they feel they can lose their lives. This jail has to be closed; we cannot wait for lives to be lost or for the jail to take responsibility or make changes.

### **Tania Mattos, Director of Advocacy & Policy**

Good morning, my name is Tania Mattos. I am the Director of Advocacy and Policy at Envision Freedom Fund formerly known as Brooklyn Community Bail Fund. I want to thank Chair Hanif for holding your first ever committee on immigration hearing on detention in New York and the immense impact these places have on the immigrant community not only in the 5 boroughs but also the entire country. Detained people inside Orange County Jail know it is happening and it gives them hope to keep going one more day.

Back in 2018, myself and colleagues from QDEP, BAJI, DRUM and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest decided to start the Abolish ICE NY NJ Coalition in order to organize for the end of immigration detention in both states. Three years later and hundreds of hours of organizing alongside hundreds of detained people in Hudson County Jail, Bergen County Jail and Essex County Jail and with over 100 endorsing NY and NJ organizations, NJ passed their version of dignity not detention in August of 2021. This bill does not allow for any new ICE contracts or renewals. The jails went as far as ending their contracts ahead of their end date due to the organizing by people inside detention and the amount of media attention the jails received on the abuses happening inside them. The only private facility, Elizabeth Detention Center which is set to close next year.

Simultaneously, in NY along with the NYU Immigrant Rights Clinic, we started working on ending detention in NY by writing the NY Dignity Not Detention bill. You may ask "Why are we working so hard to end detention across the country?" Because, as immigrants, we said "ENOUGH." Enough of the deaths in detention, enough of the mental torture that our families and communities go through in and out of detention, enough of millions of deportations directed by numerous presidents.

Later on, you will hear from my colleagues, Rosa Santana, Bond Director, and Ambien Mitchell, Post-Release Coordinator, at Envision Freedom Fund who will go into detail on how it is up to families, organizations and communities to help released from detention and deported individuals pick up the pieces of their lives. Some have lost their families, homes, businesses, jobs, all their money and friends.

I've worked in supporting many people in detention and with those who have gone on hunger strike and face retaliation for their non-violent protest of putting their already deteriorating bodies and health on the line. Orange County Jail is by far one of two facilities where the guards are extremely cruel. As you may know, the jail has guards who have and had ties to white supremacist groups who go out of their way to make the lives of monolingual non-English speakers and Black immigrants, and I don't say this lightly, a living hell.

I was on the phone with over 20 people this last week when 56 OCJ immigrants were on hunger strike and I could hear the guards yelling at them, calling them names. As you may know, two guards have been moved from the ICE unit to guard over another set of people incarcerated. This is not a solution. The solution is to advocate for and fund true rehabilitation programs so we can end jails and no one has to be at the mercy and rule of white supremacists. In the meantime, I urge you to join us advocating for the end of all the ICE contracts in NY through the Dignity Not Detention bill. This will send a clear message to this administration: we don't need detention or ICE in our country.