

Immigration lockup a serious health risk

OUR OPINION: INVESTIGATE DEATHS, MEDICAL CARE OF DETAINEES

Opinion
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When Rev. Joseph Dantica of Haiti came to Miami in 2004 seeking asylum, he was thrown into the detention facility at Krome. Still in custody, he died five days later at Jackson Memorial Hospital. His family and advocates believe mistreatment contributed to his death.

Even today, his abrupt demise remains unexplained, like many other deaths under the watch of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. This is unacceptable.

Shrouded in secrecy

The number of people in immigration detention has doubled in a decade to 27,500 on any given day. Meanwhile, negligent medical care is among the most frequent complaints by detainees nationwide. Inexplicably, ICE isn't obliged to track deaths in immigration custody. Thus, detainees who die and the circumstances surrounding them remain shrouded in secrecy.

ICE must be held accountable for the health of the people locked up. Congress should require that immigration authorities report every death of a detainee in its custody, whether the person dies at an ICE prison, county jail or public hospital. ICE also should have standards for healthcare and other detainee treatment. Current detention regulations are not legally binding -- although they should be.

Recently The New York Times reported that ICE had counted 62 people who had died in administrative custody since 2004. Yet ICE officials declined to release the names or details about the deaths. So the secrecy continues. Even family members, as in the Dantica case, have difficulty getting answers.

The number of deaths came as a surprise to immigration activists who had previously collected information on only 20 deaths. The American Civil Liberties Union last week filed a Freedom of Information Act request for information about the 62 deaths. Based on complaints it has received, the ACLU is concerned that poor medical care is a prime cause of detainee deaths.

In the known cases, complaints range from detainees denied medicine or treatment for serious conditions to long delays before getting medical tests or procedures. Some have accused ICE of paroling severely ill inmates to avoid paying for expensive treatments.

Lack of transparency

ICE officials insist that detainees get excellent care, and a Department of Homeland Security inspector general's report concluded that the health system generally works well. Yet Mr. Dantica's lawyers dispute a separate inspector general's report that found no mistreatment in his case.

Given the complaints and lack of transparency, Congress should investigate the medical care and deaths of immigration detainees. People who face deportation shouldn't also risk poor healthcare and death.