



ICE transfers detainees to Atlanta's federal prison, hindering access to legal aid

The Trump administration's transfer of ICE detainees to federal prisons is disrupting access to legal counsel, heightening deportation risks, and exposing immigrants to inhumane conditions, sparking outrage among advocates and attorneys.

BY MATT SCOTT • NEWS • FEBRUARY 15, 2025



Federal Correctional Institution, Atlanta. (Federal Bureau of Prisons)

For days, immigration attorney Lara Nochomovitz had no way to contact her client, an asylum seeker transferred from Stewart Detention Center to a federal prison in Atlanta.

"He's at risk, first of all, of deportation," Nochomovitz told the Atlanta Community Press Collective Friday morning. "If he were somewhere else where it was clear how to make an appointment with him, we could talk to him and do the work very quickly, but we can't because we can't even talk to him."

Federal Correctional Institution, Atlanta (FCI Atlanta) officials confirmed to ACPC that the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has begun "assisting U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) by housing detainees." [ABC News obtained](#) a Feb. 6 memorandum of understanding between ICE and BOP, which states that five BOP facilities, including FCI Atlanta, will hold male immigrants detained by ICE.



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This agreement marks a significant shift in BOP's role, and the transfers have, in some cases, disrupted detained immigrants' access to legal counsel.

A loved one of her client contacted Nochomovitz on Thursday, Feb. 6, to represent him in the asylum process. The next day, Nochomovitz learned through the ICE detainee locator portal that her client had been transferred from Stewart to FCI Atlanta. Her office tried multiple ways to reach her client but to no avail. She said the transfer left her client, who does not speak English, at risk of deportation and without legal support.

"This facility is not listed on the ICE website, and the instructions given are to call the field office, but the field office is not available," Nochomovitz said. "It's bizarre – this situation where you can't even get information on how to contact someone."

Nochomovitz likened the transfers to the Trump administration's decision to turn Guantanamo Bay, a U.S. military base in Cuba, into an immigration detention facility critics have called a concentration camp. "They're intentionally detaining individuals in places where there's not access to counsel."

Friday afternoon, FCI Atlanta officials told Nochomovitz that ICE agents had picked up her client that morning. As of Friday evening, she did not know where her client was and feared he had been deported.

Detained immigrants caught in a deadly, broken system

In a press briefing on Feb. 6, [White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt stated](#) that ICE had released 461 of the 8,000 individuals the agency detained since President Donald Trump's second term began. Leavitt attributed some of these releases to a "lack of detention availability" and urged Congress to provide additional funding for the expansion of immigrant detention facilities.

Meredyth Yoon, litigation director at Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAAJ), an immigrants' rights advocacy organization, told ACPC that she thinks the transfers are due to overcrowding in detention centers now that the Trump administration has ramped up immigration enforcement. Yoon said ICE was at 109% detention capacity, and her team heard reports of "mattress on the floor" overcrowding. The issue, she said, "is a condition that is completely manufactured by ICE and the Trump administration."

Conditions in Stewart Detention Center, where Nochomovitz's client was transferred from, are deadly. "Pretty much every year since 2006, there has been a death or two in this facility," said Amilcar Valencia, the executive director of El Refugio, an immigrants' rights organization located close to the Stewart Detention Center, which provides resources to people detained inside the facility. El Refugio has released [two reports](#) on the conditions at Stewart.

El Refugio and partner organizations [filed a lawsuit in 2022](#) on behalf of four women detained in Stewart who said a nurse in the facility sexually assaulted them. People formerly detained in Stewart [settled a lawsuit in 2023](#) with CoreCivic, which operates the detention center, for forcing detained people to work against their will in violation of federal anti-slavery laws. In 2023, more than 200 people detained in Stewart sent a petition to the Biden administration to ask for immediate action on the conditions in the facility.

However, Valencia said, "A facility like the federal prison in Atlanta cannot offer any better conditions."

Indeed, overcrowding may be just as much of an issue in Atlanta's federal prison as in ICE facilities. According to a [Justice Department Inspector General's report](#), as of March 2023, the facility had a maximum capacity rating of 1,440 incarcerated individuals. The [BOP's latest population](#) report shows that Atlanta's federal prison population is 1,728 individuals, up from 1,689 a week prior. The BOP did not respond to a question about whether FCI Atlanta had expanded its capacity since March 2023.

Beyond overcrowding, FCI Atlanta is as deadly as Stewart. The federal prison was the subject of a 2023 Senate investigation led by Sen. Jon Ossoff, [who said](#) that conditions in the facility were "abusive and inhumane." The [Justice Department's Inspector General issued a report](#) in 2024 stating that FCI Atlanta "had the greatest number of deaths" of any federal prison between 2014 and 2021.

Yoon's team learned that 57 people had been transferred from Stewart to FCI Atlanta by Friday, with another 50 in the process of being transferred. She described the conditions for immigrants held at the Atlanta federal prison as "harrowing."

"Guards referred to the detainees as '50 bodies,'" Yoon said. "One of the people being transferred from Stewart was on suicide watch, and the officer made a comment to the effect of, 'Well, we'll see about that now that he's here.'"

Trump's rhetoric vs. reality

The Trump administration frequently cites crime perpetrated by immigrants as a central cause for his war on immigrants.

Regarding Trump's mass deportations and efforts to portray immigrants as criminals, Valencia said, "That's what he promised when they campaigned, and that's what people want to see, unfortunately."

The criminal narrative is "absolutely false," Yoon said, noting that the first Trump administration carried out a similar effort in other federal, state and local jails and prisons in 2018. "It's part of a broader pattern of treating immigration as a criminal issue, which it is not," she added.

Grassroots efforts to protect immigrants' rights

Valencia emphasized the importance of community awareness and action to combat the federal government's treatment of immigrants. "The more people know about what's happening in these facilities, the harder it becomes for the government to ignore the abuses," he said. "We need to shine a light on these injustices."

AAAJ offers [Know Your Rights information](#) in multiple languages to help immigrants navigate interactions with ICE.

Public pressure campaigns demanding accountability from government leaders are an important step Valencia hopes will lead policymakers to act against "these abusive detention practices and instead invest in humane alternatives that respect people's rights."

Valencia also highlighted the importance of programs like [ICE Chasers](#), an effort organized by the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights that monitors ICE activity in the Metro Atlanta area. "ICE Chasers play a vital role in protecting vulnerable communities," he said. "They alert people when ICE is in the area, giving them time to prepare and seek legal help if needed."



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