

Protest at Howard's detention center calls out county's contract with ICE amid coronavirus

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Body

June 23-- Jun. 23--For the second time in three months, CASA and the Howard County Coalition for Immigrant Justice organized a protest Monday afternoon in Ellicott City against Howard County's contract with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Howard County's contract with ICE allows immigration detainees to be held in the Howard County Detention Center in Jessup. The center does not hold women or child ICE detainees.

"Today is just another step we're taking and being more vocal," said Jossie Flor Sapunar, CASA communications director. "People who are behind bars don't have a way to protect themselves."

Organizers said the protests have grown out of mounting concerns about the spread of the coronavirus in detention centers and growing frustration with unresponsive local elected officials.

Nearly a dozen speakers talked about their experiences or their activism against ICE contracts at the protest outside the George Howard Building. After prepared remarks wrapped up, protesters participated in a "die-in," laying on the sidewalk in solidarity with those who have lost their lives in detention centers due to COVID-19.

Miguel Ramos was the first to speak at Monday's event. Ramos spent one month and six days in the Howard County Detention Center in September after being arrested for driving without a license. He got out after paying a \$10,000 bond.

"As soon as I got there, they put me in a cell. Then they took me to another room where I stayed and that's where I got sick," Ramos said through a translator. "The bread and the meat that they give you are expired and they cause stomach and digestive issues."

Ramos said it was important to share his story so people understand what it's like to be detained by ICE in Howard County.

In 1995, then-County Executive Charles Ecker signed the county's initial agreement with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, which became a part of the Department of Homeland Security after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and has been in place in the county ever since.

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Trent Leon-Lierman, a lead regional organizer with CASA, said he hopes the protests convince County Executive Calvin Ball to reconsider the county's relationship with ICE.

"We want to keep reaching out to [Ball] and sharing [detainee] stories. We believe if he really understood what was happening, he would understand," Leon-Lierman said.

Many of the remarks from speakers and organizers focused on what they described as inactivity on Ball's part since he was elected county executive in 2018. Organizers with CASA said they last met with Ball in November.

The protest took place Monday outside the George Howard Building where Ball and the County Council work; Ball was not in the building at the time, according to county spokesperson Scott Peterson.

"We understand in wake of national immigration policies that there are misperceptions regarding who is being detained in our detention facility," Peterson said in a statement. "We are working directly with community organizations to address their concerns with open engagement and complete transparency regarding the Howard County Department of Correction's contract with the federal government."

Howard County officials say the jail only accepts ICE detainees who "pose a public safety threat," not those whose sole offense was their undocumented status. Stories from immigrants at Monday's protest said otherwise.

Laura Arroyo recounted her personal experience when ICE detained her husband in November 2017 as he was getting out of his car in Howard County. At his hearing, the judge said the reason Arroyo's husband was detained was because they had his license plate, according to Arroyo. In January 2017, her husband had received a ticket for driving while on his cellphone; it was his first infraction with the law after being in the U.S. for more than 10 years, Arroyo said.

Arroyo said for the three and a half months her husband was in custody she wasn't allowed to see him. She said he wasn't given the chance to post a bond or get asylum. Arroyo's husband is back in Mexico now, while Arroyo and her three children remain in Howard County.

Much of the frustration with Ball originates from his time on the County Council, when he and then-Council member Jen Terrasa introduced CB-9, a bill that stated county employees, including police, would not voluntarily participate in the enforcement of federal immigration law. Though originally introduced using the term "sanctuary," the legislation passed in early 2017 did not include the term.

Then-County Executive Allan Kittleman vetoed the legislation in February 2017, and an override attempt by the council in March of that year failed as well. Ball never re-filed the legislation.

Current Council Chair Deb Jung and Vice Chair Liz Walsh were in attendance at Monday's protest and gave brief remarks saying, in part, that they would both support ending the county's ICE contract. They did not say if or when they would introduce legislation to do so.

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Ying Matties, a speaker who is with the Chinese American Network for Diversity and Opportunity, said she was disappointed the issue was no longer a priority for Ball.

"We were impressed with how outspoken he was, with how principled he was. So this Calvin Ball we see right now is a different person," Matties said. "If you're doing this to people, you're wrong and we're going to call you out."

As of July 2019, Howard County charges ICE \$110 per day to hold each detainee. Between mid-2013 and mid-2019, the contract generated more than \$14 million in revenue, an average of \$2 million per year, according to figures provided by Jack Kavanagh, director of Howard's detention facility.

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Besides Howard, Frederick and Worcester are the other two counties in the state that receive money from ICE to house people detained by the federal agency at their jails. In January 2019, Anne Arundel County ended its ICE contract.

Howard County does not participate in the 287(g) program, in which county jails screen inmates for immigration violations after ICE trains local police in federal immigration law. However, Cecil, Frederick and Harford counties do participate in the program.

Before leaving the more than two-hour event, protesters took a lap around the parking lot outside the George Howard Building and the Howard County Police Department, chanting, "No justice, no peace." They concluded the brief march at the front door of the building, this time chanting, "We'll be back."

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