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Medical Experts Urge ICE to Implement COVID-19 Booster Policy at Detention Facilities

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) calls on Secretary Mayorkas and Director Johnson to address scarce access to boosters for detention populations

NEW YORK - Medical professionals are raising the alarm on strained access to COVID-19 vaccine booster doses for migrants and asylum seekers detained at the U.S. southern border. In a [letter](#) addressed to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Tae D. Johnson, leading medical professionals and public health experts expressed grave concern over the failure to provide COVID-19 vaccine booster doses to eligible immigrants currently held in ICE detention centers.

The open letter calls out ICE's failure to issue any policy regarding COVID-19 booster doses for over 200 immigration detention facilities, where only 3 percent of eligible immigrants have received a booster dose and detainee infections have reached a pandemic high amid the spread of the Omicron variant.

The statement reads, *"The number of COVID-19 infections in immigration detention rose by 520 percent in the first two weeks of January 2022 alone. As of January 27, 2022, 3,129 people in ICE custody have tested positive for COVID-19, comprising over 14 percent of the 21,602 people currently detained nationwide."* The letter argues that increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant, coupled with the inability for detained individuals to social distance, supports grounds for heightened urgency to distribute COVID-19 treatments.

ICE currently relies on the single-dose Johnson and Johnson vaccine for detainees, despite [recognition from Center for Disease Control](#) (CDC) that J&J offers limited protection against COVID-19 when compared to mRNA-based vaccines like Pfizer and Moderna. The widespread use of J&J further heightens the need for a robust booster program in order to protect people within ICE custody. The open letter recommends that the agency acts quickly to secure mRNA vaccine doses, while also implementing a booster mandate to ensure robust protection.

While PHR and partners have long advocated for the need to release individuals from ICE detention and find safe situational alternatives as asylum cases are processed, the letter reads, “...for those ICE insists on detaining, we urge ICE to act quickly to ensure robust protection of those in their care against COVID-19.”

The full letter can be found [here](#) and is joined by medical professionals from Harvard Medical School, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School, The George Washington University’s Milken Institute School of Public Health, University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine, and the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, among others.

The following **PHR** experts are available to comment on various facets of the ongoing conversation around immigration and asylum policy and related impacts:

- [Dr. Michele Heisler](#) can speak to ongoing conditions at the **U.S. southern border**, the misuse of public health law to further xenophobic policies through **Title 42 expulsions**, the health and human rights impacts of the **Migrant Protection Protocols**, and the Biden administration’s work on **immigration policy**
- [Dr. Ranit Mishori](#)’s expertise focuses on conditions and human rights violations in **ICE detention** centers, including the spread of [COVID-19](#) in detention settings and the health impacts of forced **family separation**
- [Kathryn Hampton](#) can speak to the immediate need for **human-rights based immigration policies** informed by medical evidence gathered from evaluations of asylum seekers and migrants

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Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is a New York-based advocacy organization that uses science and medicine to prevent mass atrocities and severe human rights violations. [Learn more here.](#)