

# **Immigration Agency to Reveal Some Death Data; DHS Bureau Will Report the Number of People Who Die Awaiting Deportation**

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## **Body**

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The top U.S. **immigration** enforcement official told a congressional subcommittee yesterday that the Bush administration **will** disclose more information about foreigners who **die** in the sprawling network of federal detention centers around the country.

Julie Myers, assistant secretary of the Department of Homeland Security's **Immigration** and Customs Enforcement **bureau**, said her **agency will report** such **deaths** to a branch of the Justice Department that collects similar information about inmates in state prisons and local jails.

The Justice Department publishes statistics on the fatalities, not the identities of the victims, but Myers said the change represents "more transparency" about detainee **deaths**. Since last year, congressional Democrats have pleaded with ICE to **reveal** the names and circumstances of foreigners who have **died** in U.S. custody.

Myers announced the new **reporting** requirement during a congressional hearing on medical care for **immigration** detainees, the first since The Washington Post published a series of articles last month that documented a broken system of care for the growing **number** of foreigners who are imprisoned while the government tries to **deport** them.

The articles, based on thousands of pages of internal documents, found that 83 detainees had **died** since ICE was created five years ago and that many more sick and mentally ill **people** have been denied the treatment to which they are entitled. The Post found medical staff shortages, treatment delays, sloppy record-keeping, poor administrative practices and cover-ups by employees aware of the poor care.

Yesterday's hearing was partisan and testy. Myers said ICE has been working to improve the health-care system. But detainees, their lawyers and relatives, and advocates for immigrants offered graphic testimony about misdiagnoses, medical neglect and secrecy.

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ICE officials "are defending the indefensible," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee's immigration subcommittee. "Whatever you think about the overall debate on immigration," Lofgren said in an interview, "you are not supposed to kill people who are in custody."

Rep. Peter T. King (R-N.Y.) countered, "Why should the American people be responsible for paying for Rolls-Royce medical care for illegal aliens?"

Myers and committee Republicans said that ICE figures show that the rate of deaths among detainees has fallen in recent years, and that fewer people die in immigration detention than in prison.

But one witness, who works in detention centers with foreigners seeking asylum in the United States, disputed ICE's claims, saying that health care in detention centers "is getting worse, not better." Homer Venters, a physician at the Bellevue-New York University Program for Survivors of Torture, said ICE's assertion that deaths among detainees fell by 49 percent between 2006 and 2007 is misleading.

Venters said those figures ignore the fact that detainees are, on average, spending less time in custody. Taking the length of stay into account, he testified, the mortality rate during that period increased by 20 percent.

Venters said ICE's assertion that fewer people die in immigration detention than in prison also is misleading because detainees tend to be younger and in custody for less time than prisoners.

Democrats grilled Myers about The Post's findings that more than 250 detainees had been sedated with powerful psychotropic drugs for their deportation over the past five years, even though they were not mentally ill. ICE has recently changed its rules to require permission from a federal judge before detainees are drugged for behavioral reasons. Myers said yesterday that the agency has sought four such court orders, all of which are pending.

Staff writer Spencer S. Hsu contributed to this report.

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