

# Letter from Drs. Allen and Rich to Congress

Scott A. Allen, MD, FACP  
Professor Emeritus, Clinical Medicine  
University of California Riverside School of Medicine  
Medical Education Building  
900 University Avenue  
Riverside, CA 92521

Josiah “Jody” Rich, MD, MPH  
Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology, Brown University  
Director of the Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights  
Attending Physician, The Miriam Hospital,  
164 Summit Ave.  
Providence, RI 02906

March 19, 2020

The Honorable Bennie Thompson  
Chairman  
House Committee on Homeland Security  
310 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Ron Johnson  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security  
and Governmental Affairs  
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mike Rogers  
Ranking Member  
House Committee on Homeland Security  
310 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Gary Peters  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security  
and Governmental Affairs  
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Carolyn Maloney  
Chairwoman  
House Committee on Oversight and Reform  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jim Jordan  
Ranking Member  
House Committee on Oversight and Reform  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Committee Chairpersons and Ranking Members:

We are physicians—an internist and an infectious disease specialist—with unique expertise in medical care in detention settings.<sup>1</sup> We currently serve as medical subject matter experts for the

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<sup>1</sup> I, Dr. Scott Allen, MD, FACP, am a Professor Emeritus of Medicine, a former Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and former Chair of the Department of Internal Medicine at the University of California Riverside School of Medicine. From 1997 to 2004, I was a full-time correctional physician for the Rhode Island Department of Corrections; for the final three years, I served as the State Medical Program. I have published over 25 peer-reviewed papers in academic journals related to prison health care and am a former Associate Editor of the International Journal of Prisoner Health Care. I am the court appointed monitor for the consent decree in litigation involving

Department of Homeland Security's Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL). One of us (Dr. Allen) has conducted numerous investigations of immigration detention facilities on CRCL's behalf over the past five years. We both are clinicians and continue to see patients, with one of us (Dr. Rich) currently providing care to coronavirus infected patients in an ICU setting.

As experts in the field of detention health, infectious disease, and public health, we are gravely concerned about the need to implement immediate and effective mitigation strategies to slow the spread of the coronavirus and resulting infections of COVID-19. In recent weeks, attention has rightly turned to the public health response in congregate settings such as nursing homes, college campuses, jails, prisons and immigration detention facilities (clusters have already been identified in Chinese and Iranian prisons according to news reports<sup>2</sup> and an inmate and an officer have reportedly just tested positive at New York's Rikers Island).<sup>3</sup> Reporting in recent days reveals that immigrant detainees at ICE's Aurora facility are in isolation for possible exposure to coronavirus.<sup>4</sup> And a member of ICE's medical staff at a private detention center in New Jersey has now been reported to have tested positive for coronavirus.<sup>5</sup>

We have shared our concerns about the serious medical risks from specific public health and safety threats associated with immigration detention with CRCL's Officer Cameron Quinn in an initial letter dated February 25, 2020, and a subsequent letter of March 13, 2020. We offered to

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medical care at Riverside County Jails. I have consulted on detention health issues both domestically and internationally for the Open Society Institute and the International Committee of the Red Cross, among others. I have worked with the Institute of Medicine on several workshops related to detainee healthcare and serve as a medical advisor to Physicians for Human Rights. I am the co-founder and co-director of the Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights at Brown University ([www.prisonerhealth.org](http://www.prisonerhealth.org)), and a former Co-Investigator of the University of California Criminal Justice and Health Consortium. I am also the founder and medical director of the Access Clinic, a primary care medical home to adults with developmental disabilities.

I, Dr. Josiah (Jody) Rich, MD, MPH, am a Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology at The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, and a practicing Infectious Disease Specialist since 1994 at The Miriam Hospital Immunology Center providing clinical care for over 22 years, and at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections caring for prisoners with HIV infection and working in the correctional setting doing research. I have published close to 190 peer-reviewed publications, predominantly in the overlap between infectious diseases, addictions and incarceration. I am the Director and Co-founder of The Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights at The Miriam Hospital ([www.prisonerhealth.org](http://www.prisonerhealth.org)), and a Co-Founder of the nationwide Centers for AIDS Research (CFAR) collaboration in HIV in corrections (CFAR/CHIC) initiative. I am Principal Investigator of three R01 grants and a K24 grant all focused on incarcerated populations. My primary field and area of specialization and expertise is in the overlap between infectious diseases and illicit substance use, the treatment and prevention of HIV infection, and the care and prevention of disease in addicted and incarcerated individuals. I have served as an expert for the National Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Medicine and others.

<sup>2</sup> Erin Mendel, "Coronavirus Outbreaks at China Prisons Spark Worries About Unknown Clusters," *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2020, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-outbreaks-at-china-prisons-spark-worries-about-unknown-clusters-11582286150>; Center for Human Rights in Iran, "Grave Concerns for Prisoners in Iran Amid Coronavirus Outbreak," February 28, 2020, available at <https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/02/grave-concerns-for-prisoners-in-iran-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/>.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Konig and Ben Feuerherd, "First Rikers Inmate Tests Positive for Coronavirus" *New York Post*. March 18, 2020, available at: <https://nypost.com/2020/03/18/first-rikers-island-inmate-tests-positive-for-coronavirus/>

<sup>4</sup> Sam Tabachnik, "Ten detainees at Aurora's ICE detention facility isolated for possible exposure to coronavirus," *The Denver Post*, March 17, 2020, available at <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/03/17/coronavirus-ice-detention-geo-group-aurora-colorado/>.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Kassie, "First ICE Employees Test Positive for Coronavirus," *The Marshall Project*, March 19, 2020, available at <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/03/19/first-ice-employees-test-positive-for-coronavirus>

work with DHS in light of our shared obligation to protect the health, safety, and civil rights of detainees under DHS's care. Additionally, on March 17, 2020 we published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* warning of the need to act immediately to stem the spread of the coronavirus in jails and prisons in order to protect not only the health of prisoners and corrections workers, but the public at large.<sup>6</sup>

In the piece we noted the parallel risks in immigration detention. We are writing now to formally share our concerns about the imminent risk to the health and safety of immigrant detainees, as well as to the public at large, that is a direct consequence of detaining populations in congregate settings. We also offer to Congress, as we have to CRCL, our support and assistance in addressing the public health challenges that must be confronted as proactively as possible to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus both in, and through, immigration detention and congregate settings.

### **Nature of the Risk in Immigration Detention and Congregate Settings**

One of the risks of detention of immigrants in congregant settings is the rapid spread of infectious diseases. Although much is still unknown, the case-fatality rate (number of infected patients who will die from the disease) and rate of spread for COVID-19 appears to be as high or higher than that for influenza or varicella (chicken pox).

In addition to spread within detention facilities, the **extensive transfer of individuals** (who are often without symptoms) throughout the detention system, which occurs with great frequency in the immigration context, could rapidly disseminate the virus throughout the entire system with devastating consequences to public health.<sup>7</sup>

Anyone can get a coronavirus infection. While healthy children appear to suffer mildly if they contract COVID-19, they still pose risk as carriers of infection, particularly so because they may not display symptoms of illness.<sup>8</sup> Family detention continues to struggle with managing outbreaks of influenza and varicella.<sup>9</sup> Notably, seven children who have died in and around

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<sup>6</sup> Josiah Rich, Scott Allen, and Mavis Nimoh, "We must release prisoners to lessen the spread of coronavirus," *Washington Post*, March 17, 2020, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/17/we-must-release-prisoners-lesser-spread-coronavirus/>.

<sup>7</sup> See Hamed Aleaziz, "A Local Sheriff Said No To More Immigrant Detainees Because of Coronavirus Fears. So ICE Transferred Them All To New Facilities," *BuzzFeed News*, March 18, 2020 (ICE recently transferred 170 immigrant detainees from Wisconsin to facilities in Texas and Illinois. "In order to accommodate various operational demands, ICE routinely transfers detainees within its detention network based on available resources and the needs of the agency...," an ICE official said in a statement.), available at <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/hamedaleaziz/wisconsin-sheriff-ice-detainees-coronavirus>

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Jay C. Butler, MD, Deputy Director for Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Testing," *JAMA Network*, March 16, 2020, available at <https://youtu.be/oGiOi7eV05g> (min 19:00).

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, I (Dr. Allen) raised concerns to CRCL, the DHS Office of Inspector General, and to Congress in July 2018, along with my colleague Dr. Pamela McPherson, about the risks if harm to immigrant children in family detention centers because of specific systemic weaknesses at those facilities in their ability to provide for the medical and mental health needs of children in detention. See, e.g., July 17, 2018 [Letter to Senate Whistleblower Caucus Chairs](#) from Drs. Scott Allen and Pamela McPherson, available at <https://www.wyden.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Doctors%20Congressional%20Disclosure%20SWC.pdf>. Those concerns, including but not limited to inadequate medical staffing, a lack of translation services, and the risk of

immigration detention, according to press reports, six died of infectious disease, including three deaths from influenza.<sup>10</sup> Containing the spread of an infection in a congregate facility housing families creates the conditions where many of those infected children who do not manifest symptoms will unavoidably spread the virus to older family members who may be a higher risk of serious illness.

Finally, as you well know, social distancing is essential to slow the spread of the coronavirus to minimize the risk of infection and to try to reduce the number of those needing medical treatment from the already-overwhelmed and inadequately prepared health care providers and facilities. However, social distancing is an oxymoron in congregate settings, which because of the concentration of people in a close area with limited options for creating distance between detainees, are at very high risk for an outbreak of infectious disease. This then creates an enormous public health risk, not only because disease can spread so quickly, but because those who contract COVID-19 with symptoms that require medical intervention will need to be treated at local hospitals, thus increasing the risk of infection to the public at large and overwhelming treatment facilities.

As local hospital systems become overwhelmed by the patient flow from detention center outbreaks, precious health resources will be less available for people in the community. To be more explicit, a detention center with a rapid outbreak could result in multiple detainees—five, ten or more—being sent to the local community hospital where there may only be six or eight ventilators over a very short period. As they fill up and overwhelm the ventilator resources, those ventilators are unavailable when the infection inevitably is carried by staff to the community and are also unavailable for all the usual critical illnesses (heart attacks, trauma, etc). In the alternate scenario where detainees are released from high risk congregate settings, the tinderbox scenario of a large cohort of people getting sick all at once is less likely to occur, and the peak volume of patients hitting the community hospital would level out. In the first scenario, many people from the detention center *and the community* die unnecessarily for want of a ventilator. In the latter, survival is maximized as the local mass outbreak scenario is averted.

It is additionally concerning that dozens of immigration detention centers are in remote areas with limited access to health care facilities. Many facilities, because of the rural locations, have only one on-site medical provider. If that provider gets sick and requires being quarantined for at least fourteen days, the entire facility could be without any medical providers at all during a foreseeable outbreak of a rapidly infectious disease. We simply can't afford a drain on resources/medical personnel from any preventable cases.

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communication breakdowns and confusion that results from different lines of authority needing to coordinate between various agencies and partners from different government programs and departments responsible for detention programs with rapid turnover, all continue to contribute to heightened risks to meeting the medical challenges posed by the spread of the coronavirus.

<sup>10</sup> Nicole Acevedo, "Why are children dying in U.S. custody?," *NBC News*, May 29, 2019, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/why-are-migrant-children-dying-u-s-custody-n1010316>

## Proactive Approaches Required

Before coronavirus spreads through immigration detention, proactivity is required in three primary areas: 1) Processes for screening, testing, isolation and quarantine; 2) Limiting transport and transfer of immigrant detainees; and 3) Implementing alternatives to detention to facilitate as much social distancing as possible.

Protocols for early screening, testing, isolation and quarantine exist in detention settings to address infectious diseases such as influenza, chicken pox and measles. However, the track record of ICE facilities implementing these protocols historically has been inconsistent. In the current scenario, with widespread reporting about the lack of available tests for COVID-19 and challenges for screening given the late-onset display of symptoms for what is now a community-spread illness, detention facilities, like the rest of country, are already behind the curve for this stage of mitigation.

Detention facilities will need to rapidly identify cases and develop plans to isolate exposed cohorts to limit the spread, as well as transfer ill patients to appropriate facilities. Screening should occur as early as possible after apprehension (including at border holding facilities) to prevent introduction of the virus into detention centers. We strongly recommend ongoing consultation with CDC and public health officials to forge optimal infection prevention and control strategies to mitigate the health risks to detained patient populations and correctional workers. Any outbreak in a facility could rapidly overwhelm the capacity of healthcare programs. Partnerships with local public health agencies, hospitals and clinics, including joint planning exercises and preparedness drills, will be necessary.

Transferring detainees between facilities should be kept to an absolute minimum. The transfer process puts the immigrants being transferred, populations in the new facilities, and personnel all at increased risk of exposure. The nationwide network of detention centers, where frequent and routine inter-facility transfers occur, represents a frighteningly efficient mechanism for rapid spread of the virus to otherwise remote areas of the country where many detention centers are housed.

Finally, regarding the need to implement immediate social distancing to reduce the likelihood of exposure to detainees, facility personnel, and the general public, ***it is essential to consider releasing all detainees who do not pose an immediate risk to public safety.***

Congregant settings have a high risk of rapid spread of infectious diseases, and wherever possible, public health mitigation efforts involve moving people out of congregate settings (as we are seeing with colleges and universities and K-12 schools).<sup>11</sup> Minimally, DHS should consider releasing all detainees in high risk medical groups such as older people and those with

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<sup>11</sup> Madeline Holcombe, "Some schools closed for coronavirus in US are not going back for the rest of the academic year," *CNN*, March 18, 2020, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/18/us/coronavirus-schools-not-going-back-year/index.html>; Eric Levenson, Chris Boyette and Janine Mack, "Colleges and universities across the US are canceling in-person classes due to coronavirus," *CNN*, March 12, 2020, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/09/us/coronavirus-university-college-classes/index.html>.

chronic diseases. COVID-19 infection among these groups will require many to be transferred to local hospitals for intensive medical and ventilator care—highly expensive interventions that may soon be in short supply.

Given the already established risks of adverse health consequences associated with the detention of children and their families,<sup>12</sup> the policy of detention of children and their families in should be reconsidered in light of these new infectious disease threats so that children would only be placed in congregate detention settings when lower risk community settings are not available and then for as brief a time as possible.

In addition, given the low risk of releasing detainees who do not pose a threat to public safety—i.e., those only charged with immigration violations—releasing *all* immigration detainees who do not pose a security risk should be seriously considered in the national effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Similarly, the practice of forcing asylum seekers to remain in Mexico has created a *de facto* congregate setting for immigrants, since large groups of people are concentrated on the US southern border as a result of the MPP program in the worst of hygienic conditions without any basic public health infrastructure or access to medical facilities or the ability to engage in social distancing as they await asylum hearings, which are currently on hold as a consequence of the government's response to stop the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>13</sup> This is a tinderbox that cannot be ignored in the national strategy to slow the spread of infection.

ICE recently announced that in response to the coronavirus pandemic, it will delay arresting immigrants who do not pose public safety threats, and will also stop detaining immigrants who fall outside of mandatory detention guidelines.<sup>14</sup> But with reporting that immigrant detainees at ICE facilities are already being isolated for possible exposure to coronavirus, it is not enough to simply stop adding to the existing population of immigrant detainees. Social distancing through release is necessary to slow transmission of infection.<sup>15</sup>

Reassessing the security and public health risks, and acting immediately, will save lives of not only those detained, but also detention staff and their families, and the community-at-large.

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<sup>12</sup> Report of the DHS Advisory Committee on Family Residential Centers, September 30, 2016, available at <https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report/2016/ACFRC-sc16093.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> See Rick Jervis, "Migrants waiting at US-Mexico border at risk of coronavirus, health experts warn," *USA Today*, March 17, 2020, available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/03/17/us-border-could-hit-hard-coronavirus-migrants-wait-mexico/5062446002/>.

<sup>14</sup> ICE website, Guidance on COVID-19, Immigration and Enforcement Check-Ins, Updated March 18, 2020, 7:45 pm, available at <https://www.ice.gov/covid19>.

<sup>15</sup> Release of immigrants from detention to control the coronavirus outbreak has been recommended by John Sandweg, former acting head of ICE during the Obama administration, who further noted, "'The overwhelming majority of people in ICE detention don't pose a threat to public safety and are not an unmanageable flight risk.'... 'Unlike the Federal Bureau of Prisons, ICE has complete control over the release of individuals. ICE is not carrying out the sentence imposed by a federal judge.... It has 100% discretion.'" See Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "'Powder kegs': Calls grow for ICE to release immigrants to avoid coronavirus outbreak," *CBS News*, March 19, 2020, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-ice-release-immigrants-detention-outbreak/>.

Our legal counsel, Dana Gold of the Government Accountability Project, is supporting and coordinating our efforts to share our concerns with Congress and other oversight entities about the substantial and specific threats to public health and safety the coronavirus poses by congregate settings for immigrants. As we similarly offered to DHS, we stand ready to aid you in any way to mitigate this crisis and prevent its escalation in light of our unique expertise in detention health and experience with ICE detention specifically. Please contact our attorney, Dana Gold, at [danag@whistleblower.org](mailto:danag@whistleblower.org), or her colleague, Irvin McCullough, at [irvinm@whistleblower.org](mailto:irvinm@whistleblower.org), with any questions.

Sincerely,

/s/

Scott A. Allen, MD, FACP  
Professor Emeritus, University of California, School of Medicine  
Medical Subject Matter Expert, CRCL, DHS

/s/

Josiah D. Rich, MD, MPH  
Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology  
The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University  
Medical Subject Matter Expert, CRCL, DHS

Cc: Dana Gold, Esq. and Irvin McCullough, Government Accountability Project  
Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
House Committee on the Judiciary  
White House Coronavirus Task Force