



PAPER DOLLS TO FREE FAMILIES



CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy



FREE FAMILIES



American Friends
Service Committee



As part of the current administration's broad attacks on immigrant communities, including militarized enforcement, mass deportations, and increased surveillance, ICE has resumed the cruel practice of family detention. Under this revived policy, ICE places children—including infants and toddlers—in detention alongside their parents, where families wait to see if ICE will remove them from the U.S. or if they will be granted protection and be allowed to remain in the country.

In March of 2025, the administration [reopened the South Texas Family Residential Center](#) (commonly referred to as “Dilley”) in Dilley, Texas. Following the passage of H.R. 1 in the Summer of 2025, which gave the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [\\$45 billion dollars](#) to expand immigration detention, the administration is [reportedly planning to open](#) three new or expanded family detention centers with a combined capacity to hold more than 5,700 people. More [recent reporting](#) shows that the administration is also considering retrofitting warehouses to detain thousands more people, including families. [Reports](#) about conditions in Dilley have shown the horror that awaits families inside. Further expanding family detention would threaten the safety and security of countless families and children across the country.

Why is Family Detention Harmful?

Detention is harmful for everyone, but it is particularly traumatizing for children. Detention takes a toll on children's health and compromises their development. Studies have consistently shown that placing children in detention, under any conditions, is a [traumatic experience causing lasting harms that persist](#) long after they are released, such as developmental delays, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation. Many children in detention also experience sleep disturbances and decreased appetite, and they display regressive behavior changes that demonstrate distress, such as self-injury or withdrawal.

Families in detention lack access to adequate [clean drinking water and nutritious food](#), and children sometimes experience [dangerous weight loss](#) as a result. [Inadequate access to medical care during prolonged detention](#) also poses serious health risks, with children's chronic medical conditions or acute illnesses and injuries being [overlooked or ignored](#).

Additionally, when children are detained, their education is interrupted, threatening their ability to remain at grade-level and stay on-track to graduate. Even where limited educational opportunities may be available, the stress and physical deprivations of detention make it difficult for children to focus and learn. Family detention is inhumane and unnecessary. No family should ever be detained.

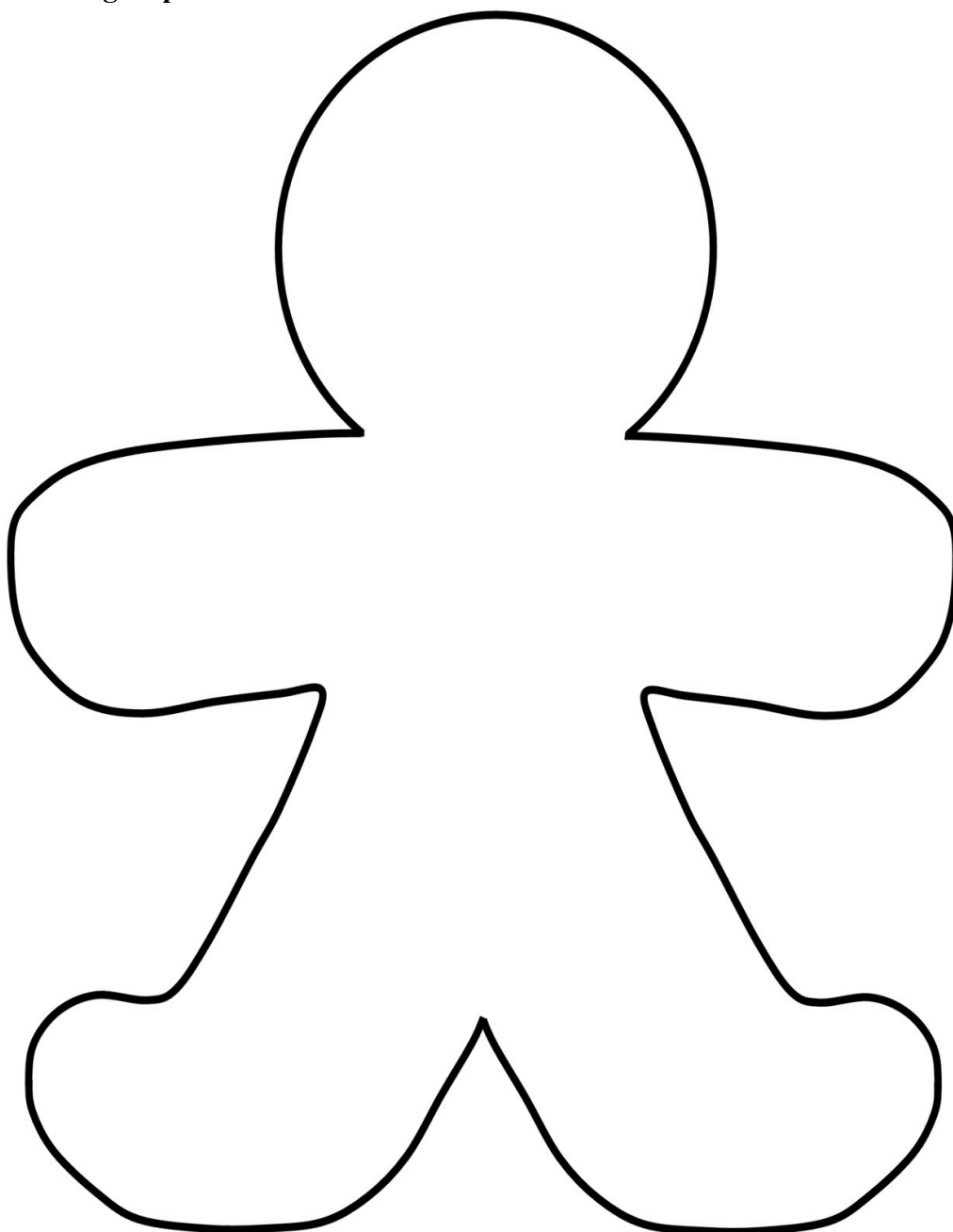
What can I do?

Everyone deserves to live freely without fear, together with their families in a place they call home, not in unsafe facilities, including remodeled warehouses. Children deserve protection from caring adults and communities, access to the resources they need to thrive, and the opportunity to learn, play, grow, and experience the joy of childhood. We invite you to join advocates, community members, and people of faith and conscience across the country in our collective advocacy efforts to end the cruel practice of family detention:

1. **Gather with your family or community—including children—to cut out and color paper dolls**, using the template doll on the next page. Write messages of hope on the dolls, creatively express your hopes for children and families impacted by immigration detention and for your community as a whole, and spend time together learning about and discussing family detention. Check out the [Free Families campaign toolkit](#) for resources and ideas to help you plan this gathering.
2. **Next, deliver paper dolls to your members of Congress at their local offices, and to your state and local elected officials. Also mail some of your paper dolls to Amnesty USA at 1150 18th St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20036 by May 11, 2026.** The National Coalition to End Family and Child Detention will then use the paper dolls you mail to D.C. in our advocacy efforts, including by taking them to Capitol Hill to deliver them to members of Congress as a powerful visual representation of the children who are in detention and the strength of the demand from constituents across the country for Congress to protect these children by ending family detention and guaranteeing the immediate health, safety, and due process rights of detained children and families through Congressional oversight.
3. **Contact your members of Congress to tell them to end the inhumane policy of family detention once and for all!** Additionally, share your concern for families in detention and encourage your elected leaders to use their oversight authority to put a stop to the widespread abuse and neglect that children and adults are experiencing in ICE custody right now. You can use our [online action tool](#) to quickly and easily contact your member of Congress by email, phone, and social media, or use the suggested text provided on pages 4-6 of this toolkit to call and write to your member of Congress and tag them on social media.

4. **Educate people in your networks about the brutal realities for children and parents inside detention.** Engage in meaningful conversations to help dispel myths, shift dehumanizing narratives, and build public opposition to this harmful policy. In our FAQ document, you'll find a list of frequently asked questions and answers about family detention to use as a resource in thoughtful conversations with your friends, family, coworkers, and others in your networks about how families end up in detention, why it matters, and what we can do about it.

Consider amplifying the impact of this campaign by inviting others to engage in all of these activities with you! You may wish to plan a time to gather with members of your family, faith community, or neighborhood to talk about family detention, decorate paper dolls together, and then call, email, and/or send handwritten letters to your members of Congress as a group.



ONLINE ACTION TOOL

The action tool is embedded at the bottom of [this blog post](#) and is also accessible using this QR code:



You can also copy and paste the embed code below to repost the action tool on your own website:

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<iframe src="https://childrensdefense.quorum.us/campaign/146990/?embedded=true&" style="border-radius:4px;border:1px solid #ffbb4e; width:100%; min-height: 800px;"></iframe>
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PHONE SCRIPT

Hello, my name is [full name], and I'm a constituent living in [city, town, or zip code]. I'm reaching out today to ask my Representative/Senator to do everything in their power to end the dangerous policy of family detention as soon as possible.

Families in ICE detention are currently being denied clean drinking water and access to medical care, and their children are being deprived of the opportunity to go to a real school or to even draw with crayons. As long as families continue to be held in immigration detention, I urge you to use your Congressional oversight power to protect due process and ensure the rights, health, and safety of the families inside, and use your platform to work to end the practice of family detention once and for all. Thank you.

SAMPLE TWEET

{{target_twitter_handle}}, parents & kids in ICE detention are denied access to due process, clean water, medical care, & even crayons. It's long past time to stop the cruelty, neglect, & abuse. End family detention now! #FreeFamilies

{{target_twitter_handle}}, why is Congress taking away Americans' healthcare while superfunding ICE to terrorize communities, separate families, & lock up parents & kids in jails without clean water or medical care? Stop the cruelty. End family detention! #FreeFamilies

LETTER TO MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Dear [Representative/Senator LAST NAME]

My name is [FIRST AND LAST NAME], and I live in [CITY AND STATE]. I am writing to you as a constituent to express my deep concerns about the families who are being detained in the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas, and to ask you to take action to end the cruel and dangerous policy of family detention.

ICE is currently detaining hundreds of parents and children in Dilley, where conditions are horrific. People with chronic health conditions or medical emergencies are being denied the care they need, infants are experiencing alarming weight loss, and families are denied access to adequate clean drinking water, forced in many cases to drink tap water at the facility that is foul-smelling and known to cause upset stomachs.

Detention also interrupts children's education. After being ripped away from their neighborhoods, homes, friends, toys, and familiar routines, children detained in Texas are being denied access to quality, grade-appropriate educational opportunities and frequently even lack crayons to play with. ICE is depriving children of the opportunities to learn, play, and create that every child deserves. These deprivations place families' health and safety at risk and leave lasting psychological scars.

Shockingly, some families are being held in these appalling conditions for weeks on end, in violation of the Flores Settlement Agreement, which sets out minimum standards for the treatment of migrant children in government custody, including limits on the length of time that children can be detained. Most families never get to speak with an attorney or appear before a judge before they are deported, and many are sent back to dangerous, life-threatening conditions.

As a constituent, it is unacceptable to me that billions of taxpayer dollars continue to flow to ICE so that it can continue terrorizing communities, separating families, committing human rights abuses, and locking up parents and children in unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

As my member of Congress, I am asking you to stand up for the safety and well-being of immigrant children and families by ending the heartless policy of family detention.

Additionally, as long as families remain detained in Dilley or anywhere else, I urge you to use Congressional oversight authority to uphold the law—and human rights—and put a stop to the widespread abuse and neglect that children and adults are experiencing in ICE custody. Demand that immigration officials provide these families with adequate opportunities to consult

with counsel, clean drinking water, hygienic conditions, access to healthcare, and educational opportunities for children.

Detention is no place for children. I will continue to follow this situation closely, and I look forward to your response. Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

[FIRST AND LAST NAME]

[ADDRESS OR ZIP CODE]

Frequently Asked Questions about Family Detention

1. What is family detention?

“Family detention” refers to the cruel practice of placing children—including infants and toddlers—in immigration detention alongside their parents while these families await removal from the U.S., or await the outcome of pending immigration applications and court cases that will determine whether or not they will be granted humanitarian protection or otherwise allowed to remain in the U.S. Family detention threatens the health, safety, and long-term psychological wellbeing of children and families across the country. The current administration revived this inhumane policy in March 2025 when it reopened the South Texas Family Residential Center (“Dilley FRC”) in Dilley, Texas,¹ a notorious detention facility that is not licensed to house children and has a documented history of neglect and abuse.² As the federal agency that is responsible for carrying out immigration enforcement, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) oversees Dilley FRC and contracts with a private for-profit corporation called CoreCivic to carry out day-to-day operations.

Conditions at Dilley FRC are shocking. Hundreds of children have been detained in prison-like conditions there for a month or longer with inadequate medical care, education, and recreation.³ Children also lack access to appropriate hygiene products or nutritious food, and they are unable to sleep due to lights being kept on in their living areas all night.⁴ Families also report limited access to clean drinking water,⁵ “worms and mold in their food resulting in children becoming ill, and threats of family separation by officers and staff.”⁶ Children are “weak, faint,

¹ Bustillo, Ximena, “President Trump brings back practice of detaining families together.” NPR. Mar. 7, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/07/g-s1-52674/trump-detention-families>.

² Kassie, Emily and Hager, Eli. “Inside Family Detention, Trump’s Big Solution.” The Marshall Project. Jun. 22, 2018. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/06/22/inside-family-detention-trump-s-big-solution>.

³ Plaintiffs’ Response to December 1, 2025 Supplemental ICE Juvenile Coordinator Report and Data, Dec. 8, 2025, Reno v. Flores, No. CV 85-4544-DMG-AGR at pp. 1-2. <https://youthlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/plaintiffs-response-to-supplemental-ice-report.pdf>.

⁴ Plaintiff’s Response, supra note 3 at pp. 1-2.

⁵ “Exclusive: Migrant families paint grim picture of life in Texas ICE detention facility, new court documents show.” CNN, Dec. 11, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/12/09/politics/migrant-families-ice-detention-facility-texas>.

⁶ Plaintiff’s Response, supra note 3 at p. 2.

pale, and often crying because they are so hungry.”⁷ While families suffer in detention with no end in sight, ICE pressures many of them to accept voluntary removal without informing them of their legal rights or allowing them to speak to an attorney about their options for seeking humanitarian protection or otherwise obtaining legal status to remain in the U.S.⁸

Dilley FRC is currently the only official family detention center that ICE operates, but ICE is also detaining families in hotels.⁹ Additionally, Congress approved \$45 billion of funding for ICE detention the summer of 2025,¹⁰ and the administration is reportedly planning to use some of this money to expand the family detention system with new facilities that will be able to hold thousands more parents and children.¹¹

2. Does the policy of detaining families together prevent family separation?

No. Immigration detention is tied to family separation, and family detention is no different. Officers and staff at Dilley FRC use threats of separation as a tactic of control against families in detention, and family members are sometimes separated and detained in different parts of the facility from one another.¹² There are also cases in which some family members are released while others remain detained, or in which some family members remain detained while others are deported.

Importantly, family detention is not a solution or reasonable alternative to family separation. Both practices are inhumane. Families should be able to live together and free, and, like all people, able to proceed with their immigration cases outside of detention, supported by the community.

3. How do families and children end up in immigration detention?

Families end up in detention in many different ways. Sometimes, they are arrested by local police during traffic stops and then transferred to ICE custody. Other times, families are arrested by ICE or other federal agents during raids on homes or businesses, or during street-level immigration enforcement activity that is driven by racial profiling.

Shockingly, families are often arrested and detained when they show up for the routine court appearances or check-in appointments that they are required to attend as part of the legal process of seeking humanitarian protection or otherwise obtaining lawful status. U.S. immigration authorities also frequently detain children and families after they cross the border to exercise their right to seek asylum, which is legal under both U.S. and international law. While

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Exclusive: Migrant families paint grim picture of life in Texas ICE detention facility, new court documents show." CNN, Dec. 11, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/12/09/politics/migrant-families-ice-detention-facility-texas>.

⁹ Plaintiffs' Response, *supra* note 3 at pp. 7-8.

¹⁰ Arnold, Jeff. "How \$45 billion in 'big, beautiful bill' funding aids ICE detention." The Hill. Jul. 4, 2025. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5385759-big-beautiful-bill-donald-trump-immigration-agenda/>

¹¹ MacMillan, Douglas et al. "ICE documents reveal plan to double immigrant detention space this year." The Washington Post; syndicated to The Spokesman-Review (Aug 15, 2025).

<https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2025/aug/15/ice-documents-reveal-plan-to-double-immigrant-dete/>.

¹² Plaintiffs' Response, *supra* note ii.

people navigate the immigration system, they should be free to live in their communities, go to work and school, and provide for their families.

4. How do people end up undocumented?

Many Americans assume that lawful immigration status is available to anyone who is willing to follow the rules and wait their turn, even if it might be a difficult, expensive, or slow process. The reality is that for millions of immigrants, there is no line to get in, no matter how long someone is willing to wait or how much they're willing to pay. This is why there are so many immigrant individuals and families who have been contributing to their communities for years or even decades but who are still without lawful status. Additionally, the administration has stripped hundreds of thousands of people of temporary lawful status.¹³ They're not choosing to stay undocumented; the system just doesn't give them a way to change that. We need to create clear, accessible pathways to lawful status and citizenship that allow people to securely work, attend school, raise families, and contribute to our communities.

Additionally, unless you have an employer or close family in the U.S., there are few mechanisms to come to the United States. And with the current shutdown of the U.S. refugee program and access to asylum at the border, options for people to seek humanitarian protection in the United States are extremely limited.¹⁴ In recent years, most people crossing the border have fled violence or persecution in their home countries and are coming to the U.S. with the intention of presenting themselves to U.S. officials to seek asylum so that they can seek safety, security and a better life. Seeking asylum is legal under both U.S. and international law, regardless of an individual's manner of entry.¹⁵

The global crisis of displacement and forced migration cannot be solved with border restrictions or cruel deterrence policies like mass detention and deportations. It can only be addressed through a human rights-based approach that addresses the root causes that force people to flee, provides safe pathways to protection to the United States, and includes a fully funded reception system to address the humanitarian needs of those arriving to the border to seek safety. This is the kind of holistic response that can help all of our communities thrive.

5. Why is it important for parents in detention to be able to keep their parental rights?

When immigrant parents are detained by immigration officials and separated from their children, the current system often prevents them from making basic decisions about what happens to their children, like deciding who will care for them or where they'll live.

¹³ Bragg, Juliana. "All the Nations Who've Lost Immigration Protections Under Trump." *Axios*. Nov. 24, 2025. <https://www.axios.com/2025/11/24/trump-immigration-temporary-protected-status-myanmar-burma-somalia>

¹⁴ Spar & Bernstein Law Offices, "Border Control Reimagined: Asylum Restrictions, and the New Southern Border Reality in 2025." Jul. 23, 2025.

<https://www.lawsb.com/border-control-reimagined-asylum-restrictions-and-the-new-southern-border-reality-in-2025/>

¹⁵ Children's Defense Fund-Texas, "The Biden Administration just extended its asylum ban at the southern border indefinitely—here's what that means for children and families who are fleeing violence." Oct. 9, 2024.

<https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CDF-TX-Asylum-Explainer-Fact-Sheet-024-1.pdf>

Even when they are put in immigration detention, parents have legal rights to determine their children's care, and immigration officials have policies they are supposed to follow to protect these rights in the best interests of children. Children need their parents and caretakers looking out for them, regardless of their immigration status. Immigration detention should not stand in the way of parents making the best possible decisions for their children.

6. How would ending family detention benefit all American families?

As we all notice the rising cost of living, housing shortages, and budget concerns at the local, state, and national level, many of us sense that resources may be scarce and we wonder whether we must choose between providing for the needs of American children and meeting the needs of immigrant children. This concern is understandable, but the reality is that when immigrant families can legally work, pay taxes, and contribute fully, everyone benefits. Together, we are all helping build a stronger economy and stronger communities for all of us. Plus, we're currently wasting enormous amounts on immigration enforcement and detention that could be spent to fund healthcare, education, infrastructure, and other essential services that benefit everyone. The question isn't, "Which children do we help?" It's, "How do we create communities where all children can thrive?"

7. How did we end up with such harmful U.S. immigration policies?

The system isn't broken. It's working exactly as designed, and cruelty is the point. Many of our current immigration policies—including family separation and family detention—were intentionally designed to be cruel with the goal of deterring families from exercising their right to seek safety or to pursue legal immigration pathways.

That doesn't align with the core values that many of us hold dear: freedom, fairness, and protecting children. We can create a system that protects children, keeps families together, and helps all of our communities thrive. Now more than ever, as a growing number of families across the country are being torn apart and locked up in horrific conditions, it has never been more urgent for us to build an immigration system that is based on human rights and dignity, not cages.