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During Coronavirus Pandemic, ICE Renews Egregious Civil Fines Against Women Living in Sanctuary

ICE Continues to Undermine the Sensitive Locations Policy which Protects Churches, Schools, and Hospitals

NATIONAL — In the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has renewed large civil fines against five women living in Sanctuary in churches across the country. ICE recently issued Notices of Intention to Fine the women nearly \$60,000 each, just months after rescinding fines of up to half a million dollars which had been levied last summer.

The renewed fines are part of an ongoing assault on the safety of “sensitive locations”—schools, hospitals, and churches—in which ICE has for many years agreed not to conduct raids and other enforcement activities. But in recent months, ICE has made arrests of parents at school drop-off locations, and on March 12, ICE arrested a man receiving medical treatment at a hospital in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The large civil fines have been issued exclusively against a small number of women living in Sanctuary churches around the country who have fought publicly to keep their families together and safe from harm.

“\$60,000 is money we do not have in bank accounts or under our mattresses, ICE knows perfectly well that we depend on members of the Churches and the community to support us,” said Vicky Chavez, who has been living in Sanctuary at the First Unitarian Church in Salt Lake City for over two years. “We run the risk of getting sick, or our children, and if that happens, would it be safe for us to go to a hospital? Of course not, we live day by day in fear of having an ICE watching us and arresting us in sacred places.”

“ICE enforcement, including these punitive and retaliatory civil fines, does not protect public health or safety,” said David Bennion, an attorney at Free Migration Project working with the Sanctuary leaders. “Instead, by infringing upon sensitive locations and deterring Sanctuary leaders and others with final removal orders from accessing health care services, ICE is endangering the public during this health crisis.”

The Notices of Intention to Fine were dated February 27, just a day after two of the Sanctuary leaders who received fines spoke at a press conference announcing a lawsuit launched by the Center for Constitutional Rights against ICE under the Freedom of Information Act for documents and information relating to ICE’s issuance of the earlier round of civil fines last summer. Despite this renewed attack in a time of crisis, Sanctuary leaders and the congregations that support them are determined to defend their faith and shared belief in justice.

Edith Espinal, a Sanctuary leader in Columbus, Ohio, said of the fines, “At a time when the world is facing a deadly pandemic and thousands are being affected and hundreds are dying in the U.S., ICE is ramping up its attacks. It makes me wonder how far would ICE go to retaliate against me and who will be there to defend me? I worry about the coronavirus, about getting sick--can I safely go to the hospital if I get sick?”

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The National Sanctuary Collective is comprised of immigrants in Sanctuary, immigrant organizers, attorneys, and allies in faith communities.