News



A man, who would not identify himself, holds a sign at a protest camp on property outside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in Portland, Ore., on June 25, 2018. Law enforcement officers began distributing notices to vacate to demonstrators late Monday morning. The round-the-clock demonstration outside the Portland headquarters began June 17, 2018, and increased in size early last week, prompting officials to close the facility. (AP/Don Ryan)

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Even before the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy led to the forced separation of immigrant parents and children at the U.S.-Mexico border, religious groups cast a jaundiced eye on the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

Known as ICE for short, the agency has drawn widespread criticism for its aggressive arrest of immigrants, procedural missteps and documented cases of physical and sexual abuse among detainees. Last year, a report by Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General identified a series of problems that "undermine the protection of detainees' rights, their humane treatment, and the provision of a safe and healthy environment." Those included strip-searching detainees and deterring them from filing grievances.

Now two left-leaning faith-based groups, the American Friends Service Committee and the Unitarian Universalist Association, are joining a growing call to abolish ICE.

On Monday (June 25), the AFSC, a group founded by the Quakers, issued an email urging recipients to "Sign our petition today: Tell Congress to abolish ICE!" And this past weekend, delegates to the Unitarian Universalist Association meeting in St. Louis passed a resolution calling for ICE to be dismantled. The sentiment was so overwhelming that no count was taken.

"ICE has a history of terrorizing and abusing immigrants and operating outside the law," the UUA resolution reads. "As the agency carrying out the administration's barbaric policies, it must be dismantled so humane and appropriate processes and agencies can be created."

Religious groups are just the latest to champion the idea of killing the agency. The effort has already gained traction among several congressional candidates plus four sitting members of Congress, all Democrats.

And Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., viewed as a potential 2020 presidential candidate, said Sunday during an interview with NBC News that "we need to probably think about starting from scratch" in immigration enforcement. Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont who is also a potential 2020 presidential contender, has so far shied from calling for the agency's elimination.

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But many faith-based groups that have been working with immigrants have never liked ICE.

The agency, created in 2003 and installed under the jurisdiction of the then-new Department of Homeland Security, was set up in the wake of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

It gained a reputation for its zealous enforcement of laws on the border, particularly with undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers. Faith-based groups working with immigrants have been among the first to point out cases where ICE has picked up people suspected of being undocumented in workplace raids, outside of hospitals and riding in cars.

"We have many groups around the country working with immigrant communities, experiencing firsthand the systematic abuses that ICE has been carrying out," said Kristin Kumpf, director of human migration and mobility for the AFSC.

The organization hopes to get some 10,000 signatures for its petition to Congress. As of Wednesday it had received half that. Many of its supporters have also adopted the Twitter hashtag #AbolishICE.



Delegates voting during the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association meeting in St. Louis on June 20-24, 2018. (Courtesy of Nancy Pierce/UUA)

Kumpf said she didn't feel like the organization needed to offer a solution for replacing ICE.

"We don't need to have an exact blueprint for restructuring the federal government in this moment to say that ICE is immoral, unaccountable and dangerous," she added.

Neither did Carey McDonald, an executive vice president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. "We lived without ICE for a long time," he said, adding that the country could easily go back to pre-2003 status quo. Prior to ICE, the government empowered the Immigration and Naturalization Service to undertake enforcement.

McDonald said 60 percent of the association's 1,000 congregations reported taking some public action to support immigration justice last year. Some 80 UUA congregations have pledged their willingness to offer sanctuary to undocumented immigrants and others are training now to accompany detained

immigrants when they go to court hearings, often with no legal counsel.

"One of our principles is the inherent worth and dignity of each person," McDonald said. "Our immigration system denies the dignity of people in the system."