News



Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, celebrates Mass at St. Pius X Church in El Paso Sept. 23, 2019. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



Rhina Guidos

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — April 8, 2020
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to grow in the U.S. faster than anywhere else in the world, the Catholic bishop of El Paso, Texas, is asking local authorities to release nonviolent migrants at his local U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities.

"Faith and reason tell us that the right thing to do right now is to protect each other by taking steps toward social distancing," wrote Bishop Mark J. Seitz in an April 7 statement. "The federal government has already recognized that this is very nearly impossible in facilities like prisons and detention centers."

That's why he is making the call to the agency "to urgently and quickly prioritize the release of nonviolent migrants from the immigration detention facilities in our community," he said.

"This will protect the health of migrants, our immigration enforcement personnel and our entire El Paso community. Our faith compels us to welcome the stranger with compassion. And this is also a matter of public health," he said.

"By keeping nonviolent migrants in immigration custody, we are placing everyone in danger. Together, I know we can overcome this crisis," Seitz said. "I also invite our local government leaders to join me in calling on ICE for an urgent dialogue on the need to release nonviolent offenders. This cannot happen soon enough. Our lives depend on it."

In mid-March in a letter to Congress, two doctors expressed "gravely concern" about the consequences of confinement of migrants in detention centers during the pandemic.

Dr. Scott Allen and Dr. Josiah Rich, experts in medical care in detention settings, warned in a March 19 letter to lawmakers of the "imminent risk to the health and safety of immigrant detainees" and to the general public if the virus spreads in immigration detention facilities.

In a March 17 opinion piece in The Washington Post, they argued for the release of detainees in general who do not pose a threat to society, warning of a public risk to workers inside facilities and their families — as well as those detained.

Seitz, in his statement, said that "this is an unprecedented moment when every El Pasoan and all of our institutions are being called to solidarity, compassion and concern for the entire community."

He continued: "In a sober way, now we see how each of our destinies really are intertwined, and how every one of us really is our brother’s keeper."

The El Paso based organization Hope Border Institute expressed its support for the bishop's statement and also called for "immediate steps to release migrants from immigrant detention centers in the borderlands."

"The vast majority of migrants in ICE custody have committed no crime at all and represent no threat to our community," said Dylan Corbett, the organization's executive director in an April 7 statement. "However, the continued mass detention of migrants and asylum seekers in these facilities in this time of COVID-19 pandemic represents a clear and present danger to the health of migrants, border enforcement personnel and the entire El Paso community. As Seitz has pointed out, this cannot happen soon enough; our lives depend on it."

Read this next: Pandemic exacerbates fear, challenges for undocumented immigrants

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Coronavirus** feature series. View the full series.