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An immigration rights activist is seen outside U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement hea

An immigration rights activist is seen outside U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement headquarters in Washington July 17, 2020. The agency announced July 9, 2021, that it will no longer detain most pregnant, nursing and postpartum women for deportation. (CNS photo/Leah Millis, Reuters)



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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the agency involved in deportations and other immigration-related detention proceedings, announced July 9 it would not detain, arrest or take into custody pregnant or nursing migrants for violating immigration laws except in exceptional circumstances.

This includes women who have given birth within a year, the agency said, adding it was doing so "in recognition of the time needed for infant development and parental

bonding."

"ICE is committed to safeguarding the integrity of our immigration system and preserving the health and safety of pregnant, postpartum and nursing individuals," said Tae D. Johnson, acting ICE director. "This reflects our commitment to treat all individuals with respect and dignity while still enforcing our nation’s laws."

But when detention is necessary, the agency said in the statement, it would provide "general health and well-being care, including regular custody and medical reevaluation, ensuring appropriate pre- and/or post-natal and other medical and mental health care."

Detention for pregnant migrants was rare during the Obama administration, but the Government Accountability Office said that under President Donald Trump, it saw an 80% increase in their detention a year after his administration ended the Obama-era policy against detaining pregnant migrants.

Faith organizations in the United States in 2018, including Catholic leaders involved with the Interfaith Immigration Coalition, repeatedly called on the Trump administration to halt the practice.

At the time Lawrence E. Couch, director of the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, said that "our foundations will crumble if we withdraw our compassion for the other."

"Nothing exemplifies this more than the unnecessary detention of pregnant women,"he said. He made the comments in a letter addressed to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which oversees ICE.

The Franciscan Action Network also voiced its opposition.

"We are deeply troubled by the cruel ICE directive which eliminates the presumption that ICE should not detain pregnant women except in extraordinary circumstances, and also removes some requirements regarding treatment of pregnant women in detention," FAN member Sr. Marie Lucey of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia said in 2018.

"Not only our religious faith, but our belief in basic human rights of all people, requires us to challenge this inhumane directive which endangers the lives of vulnerable pregnant women," Lucey said. "We call on ICE to restore its August 2016

memo on the Identification and Monitoring of Pregnant Detainees with presumption of release."

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