News



A woman and her attorney, at left, go over paperwork at the George H. Fallon Federal Building in Baltimore, a check-in field office for the U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. NCR accompanied the woman the day of her appointment. (Paperwork has been obscured digitally.) (NCR photo/Patricia Zapor)



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Baltimore — June 11, 2025

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Just six months ago, an appointment to check in with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement would have seemed routine — go in, make sure the federal authorities have your information, receive a date to return and do it again in a year or so.

Not anymore.

On this spring day, a 40-year-old woman approached the ICE check-in with trepidation. The woman, who asked that her name not be used for fear of government retaliation, thought it was likely she would be detained and deported.

She wasn't.

But the ICE appointment itself now sends terror through immigrant families, many who have fled violent gangs and other conditions in Latin America. Many families came to the United States to live simple lives, remain here legally, closely follow orders from the government, and yet live with the fear that any interaction with ICE could mean the family is separated.

The Trump administration is moving aggressively to remove immigrants across the country. Although it's not everyone's experience, for some, routine check-ins with ICE are turning into ambushes where they are taken into custody and swiftly removed from the United States, according to NCR interviews, immigration groups, members of Congress and media reports.



An ID badge for a visitor at George H. Fallon Federal Building in Baltimore, a check-in field office for the U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. (NCR photo/Patricia Zapor)

The National Catholic Reporter followed the experience of one family from Mexico. The family lives outside Washington, D.C. It includes the woman from Mexico, her older sons, now 23 and 15, her husband and their two U.S. citizen boys, ages 8 and 6. They are members of St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

At the request of the family's attorney from a Catholic Charities immigration agency, their names are not being used to shield them from repercussions. The attorney also asked not to be named to protect the clients.

This family's situation is the reality for tens of thousands of people. There is no suggestion that they have broken any laws and they followed the rules for asylum-seekers when they entered the country. Some members of their household are U.S.

citizens, some have legal status, some do not. Yet the whole family would be torn apart if one member is deported.

Politicians and activists nationwide have been sounding the alarm.

U.S. Rep. Jimmy Gomez, a Democrat from Los Angeles, denounced the practice in a news release on June 6. "These are not criminals," said Gomez, a member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. "These are families who followed the rules. Filed the paperwork. Showed up on time. Instead, they're being treated like they broke the law just for seeking asylum."

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'It's in God's hands'

An NCR reporter accompanied the woman from Mexico on a recent morning as she arrived at Baltimore's George H. Fallon Federal Building carrying only a small purse and a thick stack of papers detailing her efforts to obtain asylum. She was dressed practically – jeans, tennis shoes and a light jacket.

"I have hope," she said when asked if she considered bringing more belongings with her. "I don't need a suitcase."

Her attorney brought a warm sweatshirt to give her in case she was taken into custody. ICE detention centers are notoriously kept icy cold. The Baltimore ICE facility is the subject of a federal class action lawsuit filed by the Amica Center for Immigrant Rights alleging the detention center's conditions are inhumane and overcrowded.

The woman and her two older sons came to the United States from Mexico in 2015 to escape drug cartel threats in their hometown.

After a three-day bus trip across Mexico with her 14- and 5-year-old boys, she lawfully presented herself to immigration authorities at the border and declared her intention to seek asylum. She was allowed to enter the United States and granted parole under the Immigration and Nationality Act, which entitled her to remain in the country while her asylum case worked through the bogged-down immigration legal system, her attorney said.



Outside the George H. Fallon Federal Building in Baltimore, a check-in field office for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (NCR photo/Patricia Zapor)

On the morning of her appointment, while the Mexican woman and her attorney waited for their turn to enter the office labeled as "ICE Detention and Removal Operations," perhaps a dozen other immigrants patiently stood in line, clutching their paperwork. They included Latinos, Africans and Asians.

Among a handful of relatives and friends lingering in the hallway by the elevators, a Cameroonian immigrant in Army fatigues waited nervously for his brother. The soldier said he was a naturalized U.S. citizen but his brother hasn't been in the United States long enough to apply for citizenship.

Half an hour or so after they disappeared into the waiting room, a young Latina and her small child came back to the elevators. She was puzzled that they told her to return in just two days, but relieved that she wasn't being deported that day.

Soon a couple from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, came out, smiling. "*Un año*," they said in Spanish, meaning they come back in another year. Their paper noted their appointment for June 2026. Others came out reporting they also were told to return in a year.

When the Mexican woman's asylum case was dropped a year ago without a final hearing, the government did not order her removal. For a year she heard nothing about her immigration status. Then a letter came a few weeks ago ordering her to appear at the office of ICE Detention and Removal Operations.

"I think there is not much hope," she said before her appointment. She acknowledged being "nervous and preoccupied" yet still clinging to a bit of hope about what might happen. "It's in God's hands."

She said if she got sent back to her country she could live with relatives. Her younger U.S. citizen children would join her, but the older sons would stay in Maryland.

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Over the last decade, her foreign-born sons were approved for Special Immigrant Juvenile status, or SIJ, which allows certain children to apply to be allowed to stay in the United States when they have been subject to parental abuse, neglect or abandonment. The half-brothers' treatment by their fathers was the applicable situation that qualified them for SIJ protection from deportation, explained her eldest son.

SIJ status provides permission to work, a path to permanent residency, known as green cards, and eventually the possibility of U.S. citizenship.

That makes this family "mixed status," where some members are U.S. citizens, some have legal immigration status and others do not, according to her lawyer. In their case, that led to making multi-layered plans for what would happen if she was detained that morning.

The eldest son would continue working and assume guardianship of his 15-year-old brother, who is still in high school, he said. The two younger boys, in second grade and kindergarten, and their father would join their mom in their home country,

crowding into the houses of family members in their small town.

Half an hour after her appointment time, the woman and her attorney came out of the interview room, relieved smiles on both their faces. She, too, had been given an appointment for June 2026.

She quickly phoned her son to share the good news. He had dropped her off at the federal building and gone to wait nearby, careful to be out of sight of ICE enforcement agents.

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He explained that their SIJ status means he and his brother "can't leave the United States until we have a green card."

"My life would change a lot," he acknowledged. "With my mom here I can focus on work and long-term plans, saving money. I've never been separated from my mom."

The young adult is a restaurant manager now and he hopes to one day to open his own restaurant, he said.

Since the beginning of 2025 when the Trump administration began promising mass deportations, "we have been talking about our whole situation," he said. "If she had been taken away we had a plan."

The emergency plan was that the older brother was prepared to become his younger brother's guardian, make sure he finished school, and had adequate food and shelter.

"That was the main thing for me," he said. "It's better for the little kids to be with our mom, so they would go to Mexico with her."

The eldest son said his family is not especially demonstrative about sharing feelings, but the day after the check-in appointment "you can definitely feel the vibe."