News



People attend a vigil in support of immigration detainees at the entrance of "Alligator Alcatraz" Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, detention center at the Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport in Ochopee, Fla., Aug. 10, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Marco Bello)

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A Central American nonprofit center in Florida reports one of its client family members — despite having an active asylum claim and no criminal record — was recently detained on his way to work and sent to Florida's "Alligator Alcatraz." The migrant detention facility, known for its deliberate placement within the inhospitable environment of Florida's Everglades, is being used as a model for other states to set up similar facilities.

The detained man is one of five landscape workers who were on their way to a job in the nearby suburb of Wellington when they were apprehended by law enforcement the second week of August; he is also father to one of the youth club members at the Guatemalan Maya Center here. If deported, he leaves behind a wife and several children.

"That family is one of five (client families) right now who had relatives or direct parents placed recently in detention (at Alligator Alcatraz or elsewhere)," said Mariana Blanco, director of operations at the Guatemalan Maya Center in Lake Worth and situated just 15 minutes south of President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate and club in Palm Beach County.

A decades-old community hub and nonprofit advocacy center for displaced Guatemalans in the U.S., the Guatemalan Maya Center and its priest-chaplain and co-founder, Fr. Frank O'Laughlin, traveled south the morning of Aug. 16 to pitch a tent and celebrate an outdoor Mass just outside the entrance to Alligator Alcatraz.

The center's staff were able to communicate by telephone in advance with the detained landscaper to let him know they were praying for him and he indicated to them that he would be praying from inside the facility as well, according to Blanco.

"He told us he is part of a group of 100 they are moving to a detention facility near Washington, D.C.," she told OSV News. "Alligator Alcatraz is just a temporary space for holding people up to two weeks and then they are transferred to different

centers across the country."

Lindsay McElroy, lead immigrant justice organizer at the Guatemalan Maya Center, said one of her former volunteers is working with a church-based project to track cases being sent to Alligator Alcatraz.

She said has also seen evidence of inhumane treatment of detainees at the hands of law enforcement agents due to what she believes is a result of hateful rhetoric at the political level.

She told OSV News that the pilgrimage to Alligator Alcatraz was to send quite the opposite message.

"We just thought it was really important to stand with the people," McElroy said. "Father Frank (O'Laughlin) describes (Mayans) as heroes who fled their homeland to give their children a better life."

The Irish-born priest is a longtime migrant advocate and community activist who has pointed out that the Guatemalan Maya Center was established 30 years ago primarily to offer prenatal care to migrant women.

In an Aug. 14 statement, Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski said there are some 60,000 people currently in detainment and that an enforcement-only approach is costly both to taxpayers and families whose lives are disrupted by family members detained.

The archbishop said those being detained are not "the worst of the worst" — referring to language the Trump administration has used to justify its immigration enforcement policies — but are "for the most part hard working men and women who do in fact contribute to our communities."

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According to statistics for fiscal year 2025 maintained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and accessed Aug. 20 by OSV News, 70.4% of the 59,380 people detained by ICE have no criminal convictions and would therefore be entitled to the presumption of innocence until proven guilty in the U.S. justice system.

These 41,822 persons in detention without criminal convictions include 17,558 people with pending criminal charges (29.6% of the total in ICE detention) and 26,947 people accused of immigration violations, but who have neither criminal convictions nor pending criminal charges (45.4% of the total in ICE detention).

"A program to regularize migrants would be more humane, more economical, more worthy of an America that aspires to be great again," Wenski said.

The archbishop's remarks come at a time when there are two separate legal hearings before the courts concerning Alligator Alcatraz: one dealing with alleged inhumane conditions at the facility and lack of due process for detainees and another case dealing with environmental issues.

The Associated Press reported that in a 47-page ruling issued late Aug. 18, U.S. District Judge Rodolfo Ruiz in Miami "dismissed part of a lawsuit that claimed detainees were denied access to the legal system" at the detention facility. Such claims, he said, are now moot because the Trump administration has since determined their cases can be heard at the Krome North Processing Center near Miami.

Ruiz granted a change of venue for remaining claims about inhumane conditions to be addressed by the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida.

Alligator Alcatraz is within the territory of the Diocese of Venice but relatively close to the cities of Miami and Naples.

"There have been a lot of raiders in our city and this week a lot of raiders affecting our (Guatemalan Maya Center) community," Blanco told OSV News. "Usually they are conducted in the morning and on the highways by Florida Highway Patrol with ICE or Border Patrol agents joining in, but we have seen a lot of the Highway Patrol present on our neighborhood streets — not only the state roads."

Asked if she knew where many of the detainees were being repatriated to, she said to their home countries.

"What we are seeing is a complete violation of their right to seek asylum — many of these cases had asylum pending and had work permits, but were detained. We are no longer respecting the laws in place for immigration," Blanco added.

Other ICE detention centers like Alligator Alcatraz have been under consideration for other locations, including in North Florida, Indiana and Nebraska.

The North Florida facility, the vacant Baker Correctional Institution in Sanderson, was dubbed "Deportation Depot" by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Catholic. However, The Home Depot objected to the use of their branding in a limited run (now scrapped) of "Deportation Depot" merchandise offered by Florida's Republican Party.

On Aug. 6, the Department of Homeland Security announced "a new partnership with the state of Indiana to expand ICE detention space by 1,000 beds." According to news reports, the Miami Correctional Facility in Bunker Hill, Indiana, has 1,000 unused beds that are being made available to ICE to detain migrants. The facility has been dubbed by DHS as the "Speedway Slammer."

Republican Gov. Mike Braun said in a statement, "Indiana is taking a comprehensive and collaborative approach to combating illegal immigration and will continue to lead the way among states."

In Nebraska, Gov. Jim Pillen, also a Republican, announced Aug. 19 that ICE is developing a detention center in McCook, a city of about 7,500. DHS labeled the facility the "Cornhusker Clink."

"We want President Trump to know that Nebraska is supportive and grateful for his ongoing, critical work with (DHS) Secretary (Kristi) Noem to arrest and deport" migrants who commit crimes, Pillen said in a statement.