News



People gather for a prayer service outside the Delaney Hall detention center, Sunday, Aug. 24, 2025, in Newark, N.J. (RNS/Fiona Murphy)

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Newark, N.J. — August 26, 2025
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Early on Sunday morning (Aug. 24), a dozen activists prayed in a circle before the barbed-wire gates of Delaney Hall, the 1,100-bed immigrant detention center that is the largest on the East Coast.

As a line of visitors, mostly family members of people who have been arrested, began to form in front of a guard booth, Kathy O'Leary, the organizer of the event, and Fr. Eugene Squeo led the service.

" We are here because we recognize the dignity of each and every human person, Squeo, a retired diocesan priest of Newark, said in English, after first announcing the words in Spanish. "And no one should be treated cruelly or inhumanely."

The "Let Us Pray" service, the first of what organizers hope will be a weekly gathering, lasted about 15 minutes and included mostly Catholic activists, with a few Protestant and secular participants joining. O'Leary, the region coordinator of New Jersey Pax Christi, a Catholic peace organization, handed out sheets of paper with songs, and the group swayed solemnly left to right as they sang in unison, "Christ be our light. Longing for light, we wait in darkness."

A small altar sat in the middle of the circle holding sanctus bells, prayer cards and a photo of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, the Catholic patroness of immigrants the leaders called on for intercession. Two people joined the group from the visitor's line. Clutching the paper, both said they wished to remain anonymous and kept their eyes fixed on the sidewalk below.

"It's the idea of these spaces to steal people's hope," O'Leary told RNS. "Cruelty is the point. So, the perfect foil to that is love and life and beauty. We also want to lift up the fact that people are not being cared for inside spiritually, that clergy should be allowed in. So, we're calling it Let Us Pray."

Participants said they plan to come back every Sunday for as long as Delaney Hall remains open.

Delaney Hall, first opened in 2000, is operated by the private prison company GEO Group and was used for years as a county jail. From 2011 to 2017, it housed about 450 immigrants under contract with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. This February, ICE awarded GEO a $1 billion, 15-year contract to reopen the site, and detainees, many arrested several states away, began arriving May 1.



Signs outside the Delaney Hall detention center, Sunday, Aug. 24, 2025, in Newark, N.J. (RNS/Fiona Murphy)

The tents arrived soon after. Set up each weekend by volunteers, the tents have tables offering water and coffee, as well as coloring books for the many visiting children. Volunteers in the tents on Sunday handed out food and included Catholic sisters from Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, members of Pax Christi and of First Friends, a secular nonprofit that provides support and advocacy to immigrants and asylum seekers.

The for-profit detention center requires visitors, mostly women and children, to wait in what amounts to an active driveway, sometimes for hours, for the chance at a 15-minute visit with loved ones inside. At most ICE facilities, visitors wait in dedicated reception areas or lobbies, with posted visitation schedules announced in advance — usually over the phone or online. Volunteers told RNS that visitation rules at Delaney Hall often shift without notice, leaving families standing in the sun for hours or, in some cases, turned away at the gate after traveling three or four hours and told to return the next day.

On Sunday morning, as the group gathered for the prayer service, a white bus with caged windows rolled past the visitor line and the cluster of tents outside Delaney Hall. The families standing in line strained to see the men inside the bus; two women wept.

"No one knows where they are going," said O'Leary, who has been coming to the site for months. Many watching expressed fear that the men were being taken to the airport, bound for deportation to one of the foreign countries where the Trump administration has been sending immigrants since mid-February.

Delaney Hall's reopening has been fraught. On May 9, Newark Mayor Ras Baraka and several members of Congress were arrested after attempting to inspect the facility without notice. A month later, four detainees escaped by breaking through a wall and scaling barbed wire with bedsheets, prompting visitation hours to be shifted from every day to weekends only.

Several reports by local immigration nonprofits claim pastoral care is being denied to detainees currently in Delaney Hall, including First Friends of NJ & NY, Faith in New Jersey and New Jersey Immigrant Justice.

Monica Aguilar, of the Newark nonprofit Action 21, has been working with immigrant families since 2007 and visiting the facility in Newark since May. Aguilar, whose

single mother moved her and her four siblings from Ecuador to the United States when she was a child, knows the experience of immigration firsthand and said she grounds herself in her Catholic faith. It's why she's grateful to O'Leary and the Let Us Pray service.

"Immigration is a feeling of despair in people's hearts," said Aguilar, who emphasized the need for spiritual care for people on both sides of the barbed-wire fence.

"A prayer will reach inside those walls to people who are looking at us. Hopefully, they can see us through the windows. Sometimes at night, we can see the shadows," she said. "I don't know if they can see us, but it will reach their spirit."

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David Grande, a 27-year-old law student and bartender from Brooklyn, stood outside the gate Sunday morning after learning his father had been detained on Aug. 20. His father, who Grande said was a Mexican national and has lived in the New York, New Jersey area for more than 27 years, was arrested with nine others during a workplace raid in Edison, New Jersey, according to Grande.

Grande said he first heard from his father in a call from a New Jersey prison, during which his father explained he was in custody and would need to appear in court on Sept. 2.

On Sunday, Grande said he spent more than $60 on an Uber to the detention center for a 10 a.m. visit but was told by the front guard, nicknamed "Mr. Sunshine" by volunteers for his aggressive demeanor, that his appointment had been pushed to 4 p.m.

"I never in my life thought that he'd be detained or this would be my reality," Grande, an American citizen and Catholic, said. "I don't just pray in good moments; I pray in bad moments, too. And, well, I don't know what this test may be."

Lorna and William Henkel, members of First Friends and PAX Christi New Jersey, said they found the prayer service encouraging and inclusive. William is a retired pastor in the Reformed Church in America."I think that this was very meaningful to me," William said. "We belong to something larger, which we support and which supports

us. So, this place becomes a faith community also."

O'Leary said she is working with the Archdiocese of Newark to hold a Catholic Mass in the coming weeks and with the Episcopal Diocese of Newark to arrange a prayer service. The plan, she said, is to invite different denominations and faith traditions to lead services in the space beside Delaney Hall for the foreseeable future.

"We're going to come out here, as long as we need to be out here, as long as we can be out here," O'Leary said. "We kind of expect that eventually we're going to irritate people, someone in power too much, and get shut down, but we'll figure out another way then to support our neighbors. We hope that this is the beginning."