News



Delaney Hall, a contracted ICE facility in Newark, NJ. (Courtesy)

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Faith leaders and religious advocates in New Jersey are calling for accountability and compassion following the death of a 41-year-old Haitian man after a reported medical emergency while he was detained at Delaney Hall, an immigration detention facility in Newark. It marks the first recorded death at the detention center since it reopened in May amid the Trump administration's mass deportation campaign.

Delaney Hall is operated by private prison company GEO Group under contract with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. ICE confirmed the death of Jean Wilson Brutus in a statement on Thursday (Dec. 18), saying he entered ICE custody on Dec. 11, after he was released from Union County Jail in Elizabeth, N.J., which followed an arrest for criminal mischief/damage to property. The agency said Brutus died of "suspected natural causes" on Dec. 12.

"While at Delaney Hall Detention Facility, he experienced a medical emergency and local Emergency Medical Services was called," ICE said in a news release. "EMS performed life-saving measures and transported Brutus to University Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, and later the hospital pronounced him deceased on Dec. 12."

The statement described Brutus as a "criminal illegal alien," and said that ICE notified federal oversight authorities and the Haitian consulate of his death, as required by agency policy. The agency stated it "is committed to ensuring that all those in custody reside in safe, secure, and humane environments."

On Friday (Dec. 19), advocates and volunteers with the "Eyes on ICE" initiative issued a statement calling for an immediate independent investigation into Brutus' death and greater transparency from immigration officials. The coalition includes faith leaders and community groups that have maintained near-daily vigils outside Delaney Hall to support families and monitor conditions at the facility, which houses about 1,100 inmates. Some volunteers took photos of an ambulance arriving at Delaney Hall, possibly to assist Brutus, on Dec. 11.

Citing a Freedom of Information Act request by Scripps News, the advocate statement said there were 12 emergency calls to Delaney Hall between Sept. 1 and Nov. 17, and argued that ICE's decision to post public notice of Brutus' death a week after it occurred underscores ongoing concerns about oversight and accountability.

Kathy O'Leary, a leader of Pax Christi New Jersey, a Catholic peace organization, said she is typically present outside Delaney Hall three to four days a week and was there the night of Dec. 11, but left before the incident unfolded.

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"When I was there, there were people coming up to us, people who had some kind of connection to inside the building, who were really concerned about a man who, several nights before, had a seizure and had to have an emergency tracheotomy performed on him," O'Leary said. "This is also not the first time that we've heard of seizures inside the building."

O'Leary said a network of volunteers documented facility events in real time through photos, videos and a group chat. Advocates said they first became aware of ICE's public notice of the death on Dec. 19, and released their statement the same day.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which oversees ICE, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Religious leaders said the death raises serious moral questions about responsibility and how human life is valued inside detention. Sr Su.san Francois, a Catholic sister who regularly volunteers outside Delaney Hall and documents her witness on TikTok, said Brutus' death "was inevitable."

"I've heard from the visiting family members that many regular medical conditions are not treated promptly and not treated well," she said. "So, I think it was going to be inevitable."

"I think that we need to raise the moral outrage," Francois added. "The fact that they waited — he died a week ago. They waited until a holiday weekend to release the news with this very un-Christian, un-human demonizing of this gentleman."

The Rev. Shannon Smythe, a Presbyterian minister who volunteers outside Delaney Hall, said she hopes Brutus' death forces political leaders to intervene. "I hope it's a turning point, but we need people with power who can stop this and say, get GEO out of our state. Get it out of Newark," she said. "We need those people with power to speak up, as activists and clergy and people with basic moral consciences have been."

O'Leary said that honoring Brutus' dignity means refusing to let him become anonymous. "I think it's important that we use his name and not talk about him only as ‘the man who died,'" O'Leary said. "We need to recognize his humanity … we

need to remember he was a person."

Delaney Hall reopened earlier this year under a long-term federal contract and has been the subject of protests, legal disputes and repeated allegations from advocates about dangerous and dehumanizing conditions.

Francois said witnessing families suffer outside the facility has heightened her concern and faithful devotion. Of visitors who wait in a shed-like structure at the facility to visit inmates, she said, "I cannot help but think about how there was no room at the inn for Jesus."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.