News



Demonstrators gather outside the Delaney Hall detention center in Newark, New Jersey. (RNS/Fiona Murphy)

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Moments before Department of Homeland Security agents fired a hail of pepper balls at the feet of demonstrators outside the Delaney Hall detention center in Newark, New Jersey, last Monday (May 25), faith leaders say they were frantically working to calm things down.

Kathy O'Leary, coordinator of the Catholic group Pax Christi New Jersey, said she was helping to push the crowd back. Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster, executive vice president of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, said she and a Christian pastor had placed themselves between agents and demonstrators, raising their hands aloft. And the Rev. Robin Tanner, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Summit, New Jersey, said she was conversing with DHS agents as she stood beside U.S. Sen. Andy Kim, who had come to visit Delaney amid reports of a hunger and labor strike staged by detainees alleging inhumane conditions inside.

Then, unexpectedly, DHS agents unleashed the volley of pepper balls. All three faith leaders — along with Kim — were exposed, some left coughing and sputtering as bystanders rushed to help.

"We got hit with the same pepper spray," said Tanner. "(Kim) got his in his eyes, and I got mine up my nose."

A DHS spokesperson said in a statement to RNS that the agents used the "minimum amount of force necessary" against "rioters" who "obstructed law enforcement from exiting the ICE facility," but demonstrators allege the incident is one of many cases of law enforcement using unnecessary force outside Delaney Hall in the last two weeks. During that period, one religious organizer interviewed estimated that at least a dozen clergy and other faith leaders have been hit with nonlethal projectiles or exposed to pepper balls, pepper spray and other crowd-control measures deployed by DHS agents and state police outside the facility.

Yet the faith leaders who spoke to RNS were almost matter-of-fact about the violent encounters, with all expressing greater concern about the people they are

advocating for: immigrant detainees inside Delaney Hall, as well as their families.



Kathy O’Leary speaks during a prayer service outside the Delaney Hall detention center, Aug. 24, 2025, in Newark, N.J. (RNS/Fiona Murphy)

Charlene Walker, who leads the multifaith advocacy group Faith in New Jersey, noted that clergy and other religious leaders have been present both outside and inside Delaney Hall long before the recent surge in demonstrations, with many protesting or advocating for immigrants at the site for roughly a year. Her group, she said, pushed for legislation designed to discontinue the use of places such as Delaney Hall as immigrant detention centers in 2021, so when news broke last spring that it was being reopened to house immigrant detainees, Faith in New Jersey quickly organized protests. In May 2025, dozens of faith leaders associated with the group were arrested outside Delaney Hall, where they had linked arms and physically blocked all of the building’s entrances for several hours.

Walker, a Unitarian, said she was dragged, "pushed and prodded by ICE and the police" during her arrest.

Also around the same time, Pax Christi's O'Leary said she and a friend began showing up at Delaney Hall, handing out flyers to prospective workers about the "basic teachings from every major religion on welcoming people who were migrating." Once the facility began operating fully that month, O'Leary noticed families coming to visit loved ones who were being detained inside.

"We started talking to them and finding out what kind of hurdles they were having" when visiting the facility, she said. "We started advocating for them with the guards at the gate."

The facility's strict dress code was a frequent issue. O'Leary said one woman traveled from Boston to visit her father who was being detained inside, only to be denied entry because she was wearing ripped jeans. A staffer with the Episcopal Diocese of New York, who was volunteering with O'Leary that day, offered to swap pants with the woman, and the two quickly changed in a nearby minivan.

The staffer, O'Leary said, still has the woman's pants.

"She calls them the 'holy jeans,'" O'Leary said.



The Rev. Erich Kussman, from St. Bartholomew Lutheran Church, center, prays with a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent outside Delaney Hall detention during a protest against the transfer of detainees, on May 26, 2026, in Newark, N.J. (AP/Andres Kudacki)

That incident spurred volunteers to begin bringing more clothes for other visitors, which eventually resulted in the pitching of several tents — stocked with water, food, snacks and diapers — outside Delaney Hall. The tents were staffed with a wide variety of volunteers, but many were affiliated with faith groups, including Catholic nuns. Propped against the walls were an array of religious signs and symbols, including many commonly associated with Catholicism.

"We called that the radical hospitality zone," O’Leary said.

Faith leaders say that as early as last summer, they began to hear unsettling reports of deteriorating conditions inside Delaney Hall. Last June, four men escaped the facility amid internal unrest after what Kim, the New Jersey senator, and others alleged were instances of infrequent meals and overcrowding. In February, more

than two dozen detainees managed to sign and release a letter that, among other things, reportedly complained of flu being "a constant problem among the detainees," as well as "stress, fever, and general body aches which could lead to an outbreak of illness or an epidemic."

In addition, a lawsuit filed this week by the New Jersey attorney general listed allegations that the facility is beset by "overcrowding and lack of ventilation; lack of or inadequate medical care or hygiene practices; unsanitary food and drink preparation and storage; and the unchecked spread of communicable diseases like COVID-19 and Influenza." The suit also alleges that inspectors who toured the facility last month were barred from accessing the "medical unit; toileting and shower facilities; ventilation; HVAC; and sleeping areas."

DHS has publicly derided many of the allegations as "smears" forwarded by "sanctuary politicians."

But Tanner, the Unitarian Universalist minister, said she has seen evidence of issues inside the facility. Accompanying some families into Delaney Hall during visits, she said, she has witnessed detainees growing physically weaker over time. "I saw it with my own eyes," she said, describing detainees losing weight over the course of a few weeks. "They reported not getting enough food or water. Medical care, if it came, took several weeks."

The situation escalated last month, when the New Jersey Monitor reported that roughly 300 Delaney Hall detainees had launched a hunger and labor strike. DHS Secretary Markwayne Mullin has dismissed the situation as a dispute over "ethnic food," but the news spurred a surge of protests outside the facility.

Walker said Faith in New Jersey has been offering pastoral care and sometimes even first aid amid confrontations between law enforcement and protesters. She recalled a recent instance when a protester walked over to clergy and asked for help dressing her wounded arm, only for the group to realize the arm was broken. Walker also noted that a faith leader with her group was the person who helped Kim wash out his eyes after being exposed to pepper balls.

For her part, O’Leary stressed the "radical hospitality" tent is not meant to be a protest space, but rather a center for assisting visiting families. Even so, the space appears to have become a target: This past weekend, Pax Christi New Jersey posted

a video claiming the tents had been "trashed," showing supplies strewn about the ground inside. The images showed many religious signs and symbols, such as images of the Virgin Mary, thrown to the ground, including one that read "The Empire can kidnap Joseph and jail Mary but Baby Jesus is still coming back."

Photographs taken by Reuters on Sunday appeared to show FBI and Homeland Security investigations agents inside the tent. DHS did not respond to direct questions about whether federal agents raided the tent, and why they would do so. But O'Leary said that conservative-leaning media outlets have suggested the tent is a hub for the protests — a claim she called "absolutely not true" — and that the New York Post described it as a place where "rioters enjoy puzzles and games."

"The puzzles and games are for the children," she said.

Since last week, state police have become a regular presence at Delaney Hall, distancing demonstrators from DHS agents and often using force as well, particularly in the evening. Tanner said one of her clergy colleagues was also struck with a nonlethal projectile during a protest that took place in the past few days.

Still, all of the religious leaders RNS spoke to said they were undeterred. Walker recently returned to the site for another evening of protests. O'Leary has already begun cleanup at the radical hospitality tent.

"I have been thinking about this call from the Holy One to redeem the captives," said Kahn-Troster, the rabbi who stood between demonstrators and DHS agents when pepper balls were fired. "It's not just a good deed, but a commandment — a guiding force to free those who are unjustly held and reunite with their families."

Tanner agreed. She pointed to the symbol used by Unitarian Universalists — a chalice with a flame. It's an image with a specific history: During World War II, she said, it became associated with efforts to aid those attempting to flee parts of Europe occupied by the Nazi regime.

"Literally the core symbol of our faith, the essential ritual that we begin every Sunday with, comes from that assertion that every single person has worth and dignity, and we are called by our faith to put our bodies on the line if that's the call," she said. "I could not just be silent and ignore what's happening at Delaney Hall."

Tanner added: "It would be immoral, according to my faith, for me to do so."

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