

Ohio Immigrant Alliance's Decarceration Campaigns

Together, detained immigrants, family members, and allies achieved lasting change

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'I do everything all Americans do.' Home but for how long? ICE releases Mauritanian man after 11 months



Mark Curnutte
Cincinnati Enquirer

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Between 2018 and 2022, immigrants detained by ICE in Ohio jails bravely spoke out about inhumane and abusive treatment, using the Ohio Immigrant Alliance (OHIA) and other groups as their conduits. **Through this effort, ICE jail capacity in Ohio fell 90%**—from a high of 596 “beds” per day at five jails, to a low of 59 “beds” at two facilities today.¹ **As a result, deportations across the entire Detroit Field Office area of responsibility fell by 63%.²**

This document describes a campaign by immigrants and their allies to end ICE contracts with the Morrow and Butler County Jails.

Incarcerated Black Mauritanians and their friends and loved ones on the outside began an anti-deportation campaign in 2018, after the Trump administration abruptly changed policy and started deporting people who lived in the country for decades. *See this [feature story](#) in *The Atlantic*, “How Trump Radicalized ICE,” for an inside look at how the Trump policy change destroyed Ohio communities.*

The Washington Post [editorialized](#), “The West African nation of Mauritania is known for its poets, for its reserves of gold — and for its failure to take meaningful action to curtail the pervasive practice of modern [slaveholding](#)... That seems not to concern the Trump administration’s deportation agents, who, in a stark departure

¹ Unlike with the Butler and Morrow contracts, the immigrant-advocate partnership cannot claim credit for ending the NEOCC contract. Even setting aside NEOCC, our collective work resulted in a 76% reduction in ICE detention capacity in Ohio.

² The Detroit ICE office carries out deportations of people in Ohio and Michigan. State-level data is not available.

from past practice, have sent back [dozens](#) of Mauritians to a likely future in bondage. In many cases, the deportees have lived in the United States for many years, during which they were merely required to check in periodically with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.”

While incarcerated Black Mauritians and community leaders [exposed the injustices](#) of their deportations to a country that had tortured them, they also began to publicly against their mistreatment at the Morrow and Butler County Jails. See page 2 of [“What is the Ohio Immigrant Alliance Works?”](#) and [Chapter 2](#) of *“Broken Hope: Deportation and the Road Home”* for more on the anti-deportation effort.

Mauritians weren’t the only ones being mistreated inside Ohio county jails, or the only ones speaking out. While the decarceration campaign focused primarily on Morrow and Butler County jails, it also shined a light on problems at the CoreCivic jail in Youngstown (NEOCC). A [protest](#) outside NEOCC, organized by IRTF and local religious leaders, was covered extensively on local news. OHIA handled media outreach. And the [release](#) of three Mauritians from NEOCC marked a turning point in the anti-deportation campaign.



Protestors kneel at the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center.

NEOCC did [end](#) its ICE detention contract first out of all the Ohio jails, but the facility wanted to transition to a more lucrative federal contract with the US Marshals. The ICE contract cancellation was not a direct result of our pressure, but the headache of administering incarceration under the ICE model was clearly a factor.

From 2018 onward, brave men and their loved ones continued to speak out about unsafe conditions in the Morrow County Jail, a situation that became even more deadly in the runup to COVID. Fairness for Immigrants and Ohio Immigrant Visitation [filed](#) a complaint with DHS Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties about the conditions. ACLU of Ohio sought copies of the [county jails’ agreements](#) with ICE and together, we used them to apply public pressure.

Only 1.2% of Morrow County residents were born in other countries. The jail is approximately 100 miles from the state’s only immigration court, in Cleveland, so

hearings were conducted via [grainy video feed](#) rather than in person. There was no local “justification” for having ICE detention there. It was simply a revenue raiser to keep the county jail open, and an excuse for spending part of the bloated ICE detention budget.



Immigrants exposed Morrow jail conditions to the media using OHIA as the mouthpiece. *See news articles posted at [Saidu Sow's LinkedIn](#) for most of the coverage) and [this](#) local story for examples.* We pitched stories to local and national media along these same lines, using a [backgrounder](#) and periodic [press releases](#), securing coverage in Mother Jones, American Prospect, and other outlets (including local TV, which the

sheriff had to respond to).

In episode six of the [Netflix](#) documentary series *Living Undocumented*, Cincinnati student Awa Harouna locked eyes with the camera and said, “You can watch a documentary (and) you can say, ‘Well, this is too bad.’ But at the end of the day, it’s just something that you’re watching on TV. And you can turn that off and go about your life.”

For most people, that is the case. But for people like Awa, whose dad was detained by ICE, that “reality show” played out in their own living rooms. Her father, Amadou, bravely resisted his own deportation while being detained at the Morrow County jail, and [stood up to ICE](#) at the Columbus International Airport.

Ohio Immigrant Alliance synced up with criminal legal reform advocates to join forces during COVID and beyond, coordinating strategies and messages, and supporting each others' decarceration work. OHIA pitched media stories about criminally incarcerated people who were not immigrants as part of this partnership. Houleye Thiam of the Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in US [educated the broader decarceration movement](#) about ICE detention at a Columbus rally sponsored by criminal legal reform leaders.

At the beginning of COVID in Ohio, OHIA promoted information from doctors and family members of incarcerated people to call for broad decarceration and ran an [online petition](#) to spread our message.

OHIA also used fundraisers to raise both awareness and money (and grow our grassroots base). We ran a COVID edition of our popular commissary fundraisers and regularly parceled out commissary money to people detained for ICE, starting with those who were actively engaged in the campaign. We launched a [#QuarantineICE fundraiser](#) for hotels that were needed when immigrants were released due to our demands.

OHIA began to work closely with Ohio Immigrant Visitation (OIV), a member of Freedom For Immigrants, which was providing deep support for people inside the jail. We shared intelligence and contacts, as we were each getting calls from various people inside the jail. OIV was in touch with Oscar Lopez before he [died of COVID](#) after his release from Morrow, and assisted his family as well as many, many others.

OHIA connected the ACLU of Ohio to lawyers with clients in Morrow, and to detained immigrants without representation. They filed a [lawsuit](#) demanding release of medically vulnerable immigrants; many were freed. A Trump-appointed Judge issued a scathing [order](#) in this lawsuit that is well worth a read.

OHIA targeted a monthly meeting of the Morrow County Health District, to help build our public narrative. Even though they are not the final decision makers, they are responsible for advising entities on infectious disease control in the county and had not been doing a good job at the jail. OHIA had a doctor and an advocate request to address the board through the public process listed on their website, spaced a few days apart so it did not appear coordinated. We prepared statements based on public news reports, evidence from judicial orders, and first-hand information from detained people. Here are our written statements: [Lynn Tramonte](#) and [Dr. Laura Chambers-Kersh](#).

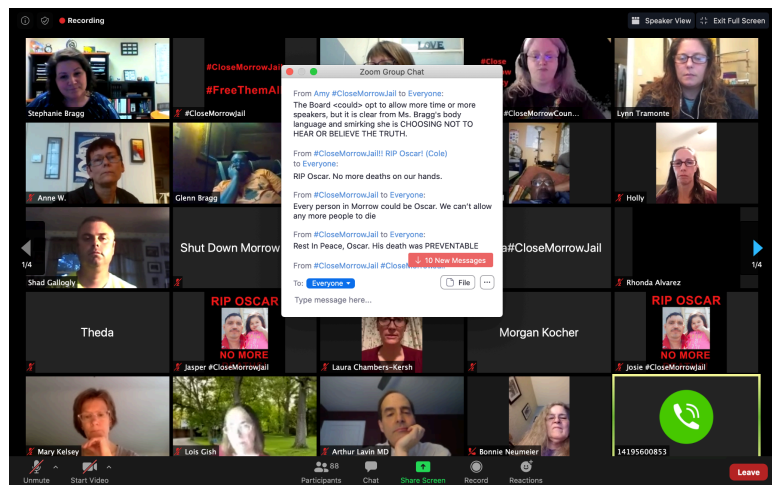
OHIA had several organizing meetings with leaders in advance, as well as a Zoom call with activists two days before the action to discuss final details and the tone of our participation. We held a Zoom "dressing room" meeting 30 minutes before the Health District meeting on another Zoom line, to help people change their names and profile photos before clicking over to the main event. Galen with Never Again Action was the mastermind and quarterback of this COVID-time grassroots action.

OHIA put together Facebook events for the pre-call, Health District meeting, and debrief call so people could easily share on social media; we posted them to several groups. We created two profile picture graphics and sent out clear

instructions for how to attend each of the three calls and change your profile picture and name on Zoom.

We reached out to elected officials who are also stakeholders and asked them to issue statements. Columbus City Council President Pro Tempore Liz Brown sent one to the Health Commissioner. We sent a press advisory to the media on the day of the meeting and followed up with email and Twitter direct message pitches to reporters who had covered the story before, as well as the reporters who attended Gov. DeWine's daily press briefings. Columbus 10TV and Mother Jones came to the (virtual) meeting; Columbus 10TV and Columbus Free Press did a story.

When the meeting started, we had tons of people on the line using the photo graphics and profile names as we had planned. The chat function was open at the beginning and so were the microphones. After the presentations from our speakers, we engaged the Health Commissioner and Board members in a dialogue, which became contentious. Our folks put a bunch of messages in the chat that the Commissioner had a hard time ignoring. She eventually muted us, but we kept up in the chat and we also started handwriting signs with messages and turning on our videos to show the signs after she turned off the chat.



The Commissioner was clearly fazed by the profile picture we used that had a photo of Oscar Lopez and his young daughter, with the caption "RIP Oscar." We stayed on throughout the entire meeting. I think they assumed we would leave after our piece was done, but we did not, and they continued to see our messages and react to them throughout the meeting. We posted updates on the meeting as it was going down on FB and Twitter, including quotes from the chat, to show the energy around our action.

We debriefed the next day and came up with our next steps, which included expanding to other targets more directly involved in the decision, and filing public records requests to follow up on items mentioned at the Health District meeting.

We kept up the pressure through social media and traditional media outreach. A news story from WCPO in Cincinnati included our narrative about the failed health care available in Morrow County and the need to free immigrants from ICE detention. Another one from Columbus Free Press also carried our narrative.

Word of our action spread in the small Morrow County community. We began to be contacted by loved ones of people who were detained in that jail for the county on criminal charges, not by ICE. We worked together to share and confirm information, which OHIA then exposed publicly so that incarcerated people and their loved ones could remain anonymous. The integrity of our information was very important to the campaign. If something we said publicly turned out to be false, it would undermine our credibility. Being able to confirm information with Ohio Immigrant Visitation and other incarcerated people and their family members was crucial.

The coordination that took place with family members of people incarcerated there for crimes is particularly important for a few reasons. One, the people we were talking to most likely had Trump-style immigration ideas and may have never met a Muslim person in their life. They began to see immigrants differently after being involved in this effort. And because they are local county residents, the information they provided not only corroborated what the immigrants said, but added a level of accountability for the local government.

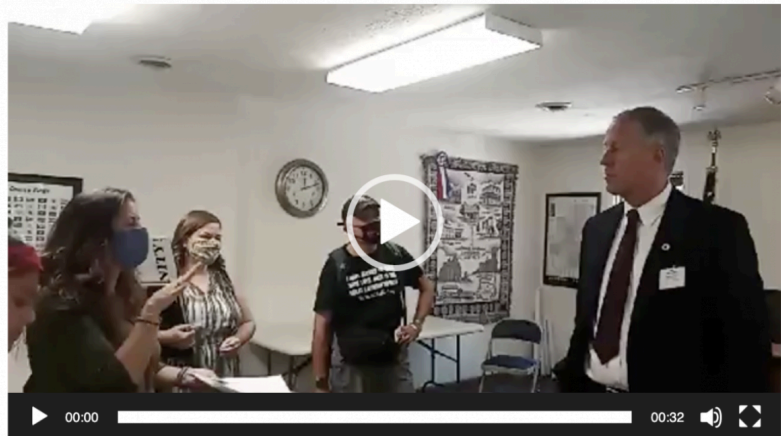
We put together a Twitter plan targeting members of Ohio's Minority Health Task Force and also did individual grasstops outreach. Some of those members ended up raising the issues in their meetings, but they were not included in the written report.

We issued a report about the jail's failures to follow its own infectious disease control plan and ICE National Detention standards (referencing the FFI complaint among other sources), with quotes from doctors, as well as a petition to close the jail signed by hundreds of Ohioans. That same day, we bird dogged a County Commissioner about the report and petition, and went to the jail to deliver PPE in a public caravan. After a tense meeting in which one of the Commissioners admitted having sold thermometers to the jail, which we pointed out was a conflict of interest, the Commissioners were forbidden from speaking to us and we were told that all communication would now have to go through the county prosecutor.

The Sheriff and County Health Commissioner were forced to respond to our report about their 100% COVID infection rate, and did so disingenuously. But, a freeze on allowing new inmates to book into the Morrow County Jail was instituted. We were able to shape subsequent media coverage to our advantage, including stories in the Mansfield News Journal and Columbus Dispatch, as well as Spectrum News (TV).

We stood outside of the jail with signs on Saidu Sow's birthday and launched a grassroots call campaign targeting the County Commissioners. Saidu got COVID twice in this jail.

A group of about 20 people attended the next Morrow County Health District meeting on June 15 and demanded an



DEPORTATION DETROIT ICE JUSTICE

10 Year-Old To Morrow Co. Commissioner: "You're Not Even Paying Attention"

update on the health measures taken to ensure the jail does not lapse into another COVID outbreak, if they were to begin accepting new inmates. Danya Contractor of Ohio Immigrant Visitation testified, and many of our criminal legal reform movement allies were in the room. It was clear that the Health Commissioner and District Board members had had conversations with the Sheriff and followed up on our points in the May meeting. They continued to defend the sheriff's office, but their defense was more muted.

The meeting got very tense. The Health District Board offered no new answers or insight, but had three police officers there to intimidate or arrest us if we got out of hand. Tom Bosco of ABC 6 in Columbus did a follow-up story as well as this second article.

We addressed these issues with the Ohio Advisory Committee of the US Commission on Civil Rights at a July 16 public meeting, and submitted this testimony.

We continued to gather information from detained immigrants and the loved ones of people detained on criminal charges for the county, and expose embarrassing

incidents that were poorly handled or exacerbated by the jailers. This involved near-death emergency incidents where the jailers refused to call 911, jail escapes, drug smuggling, and a suicide. Read about the various incidents we exposed [here](#). We had some fun on the Sheriff's Department's Facebook page with one of the escapes. When the second one happened, members of their own local community began chastising them.

We also began work on the Butler County decarceration campaign, which you can read about [here](#) and in "Insurgent citizens in the U.S. detention regime: a case study of mobilization and rights claims from within an Ohio immigration prison," [by](#) Dr. Miranda Cady Hallett and Yulianna Otero.

The staffing crisis inside Morrow jail began to grow more acute, as fewer people wanted to work there. One of the part-time nurses — the only medical staff in the building — quit. COs were passing out medication and often gave out the wrong pills or were easily corrupted. It bears noting that the doctor who was contracted to serve this jail had not been seen there once during the first several months of the pandemic, and did not see jail patients in outside facilities either. One of the most racist members of jail leadership was reportedly involved in drug smuggling at the jail and took an early retirement.

The judge in the ACLU of Ohio's case [stopped](#) ICE from putting new people at Morrow indefinitely. COs began telling people detained for ICE that the contract was going to end. The Sheriff began to talk about the need to issue a levy to keep the jail open, but refused to acknowledge the end of its ICE contract publicly. The few remaining people detained in Morrow for ICE were moved to Butler County, Geauga County, and Calhoun County (MI) jails. This included Saidu Sow and Mory Keita, who were instrumental in the [Butler County decarceration campaign](#), and Bayong Brown Bayong and Ahmed Adem, whose civil rights lawsuit helped bring about the end of Butler's existence as a 287(g) county and ICE contract jail.



QEPD (RIP) Oscar Lopez

"Morrow's inability to control the spread of infection, its demonstrated failures at monitoring detainees' symptoms, and its poor conditions create an unconstitutionally acceptable environment." — U.S. District Judge Sarah D. Morrison

By the end of 2020, there were no people detained for ICE in Morrow jail. In February 2021 we declared victory in the decarceration campaign at Morrow. But the losses to life, health, and human dignity can never be recuperated.

After Morrow County (OH) Sheriff John Hinton lost his ICE cash cow, he looked for new ways to get his roster numbers up and justify his jail's existence. Morrow is one of the least-populated counties in Ohio, and doesn't have the tax (or crime) base to actually support its own jail. To stay in business, Hinton turned on his own community. If you look at the Morrow County Jail roster today, you'll see a large number of people spending serious time in an ill-equipped county jail because they have drug problems, or violated probation — including more women. Instead of finding more people to put in jail, Morrow County should invest in addiction recovery, economic development, and attracting more residents. That would be a far healthier use of local tax dollars.

Throughout the summer of 2020, immigrants were released from Morrow, deported, or transferred to another facility, the Butler County Jail.

But conditions there were equally inhumane. Immigrants worked with attorneys to file a civil rights [complaint](#) and a [lawsuit](#) against ICE and Butler County in late 2020. This came after corrections officers attacked two Black men, Bayong Brown Bayong and Ahmed Adem, and over fifty other detained men sent a letter to lawyers and human rights organizations about the gross medical neglect, racism, and other inhumane treatment at the Butler County Jail. [They even signed their names.](#)



The letter is addressed, “To anyone who will listen to us.” Recounting multiple violations of ICE detention standards — from guards who failed to furnish immigration forms and writing implements as instructed by a judge, to being locked in their cells for twenty hours a day with no outdoor access.

The letter concludes, “It is ironic that [we] are stripped of basic human dignity—a core value that the United States prides itself on. We sincerely pray and hope that this letter will help our voices be heard outside of this concrete structure within which we are kept as we await our immigration fates.”²⁹



Excerpt of letter from men in Butler County Jail; redacted

They, and others who sounded the alarm, were heard. Today, neither Morrow nor Butler County have contracts with ICE.³⁰ ICE jail capacity in Ohio has fallen 90 percent, from a high of 596 “beds” per day at five jails, to a low of 59 “beds” at two facilities.³⁻¹ The lawsuit against Butler County and ICE is still working its way through the courts.

Still, most of the people who signed the complaint about Butler County letter were deported, as were plaintiff Bayong Brown Bayong, Mory Keita, a key witness, and Saidu

Sow.³¹ Ahmed Adem and a few others who exposed ICE and jail abuses remain home in Ohio.

In 2022, OHIA started to focus on the Seneca County Jail. We published an overview [and](#) joined in three civil rights complaints with FFI. The Ohio Immigrant Alliance put together an internal [backgrounder](#) about the county and placed an [op-ed](#) from a man who was deported after spending time at this jail.

We also continued to hold ICE and Ohio corrections companies and counties accountable. Through our help, Goura Ndiaye sued ICE and CoreCivic for the [medical neglect](#) he suffered while in detention. He achieved a settlement that paid for his hip reconstruction surgery, but Goura remains separated from his family due to his 2019 deportation.

The deportations of activists and beloved community members led OHIA to create #ReuniteUS, a campaign to change policy

so that more people who were deported can come home. OHIA started a WhatsApp group for people who were deported and wanted to be involved in the effort, and worked with national policy experts to identify paths to return in existing law.

In late 2023, OHIA published [Broken Hope: Deportation and the Road Home](#) with Suma Setty of the Center for Law and Social Policy, a book that combines information gathered in interviews of over 250 people who were deported with empirical studies and social, political, and legal context. *Broken Hope* includes several individuals' stories and photos, plus anonymous quotes about their experiences with video and audio content. We want our readers to get as close to the people we work with as possible, to understand their humanity and realize that deportation is an extreme consequence for a paperwork problem. People must be allowed to return. Recently, OHIA and CLASP [delivered copies of this book](#) on Capitol Hill.

Additionally, people who were deported continue to speak up about their experiences in U.S. immigration jails, and demand an end to ICE detention. "Finally, at least one government body has found that everything we were saying was true. They're still missing some things; this is just the tip of the iceberg. There is no fixing this system. ICE detention should not exist," [said](#) Saidu Sow, an organizer with OHIA, responding to an NPR report.

And, OHIA is educating the public about racism and other abuses inside U.S. immigration courts in a multi-part research project entitled "Behind Closed Doors: Black Migrants and the Hidden Injustices of U.S. Immigration Courts." *Check out the current installments [here](#); the final report is due out in the fall of 2024.*

Portions of this article were taken from "Broken Hope: Deportation and the Road Home" by Lynn Tramonte and Suma Setty. See [reunite.us](#) for more.

See www.ohioimmigrant.org or contact the Ohio Immigrant Alliance at admin@ohioimmigrant.org.