



CONGRESSIONAL HISPANIC CAUCUS

Joaquin Castro | Chairman

116TH CONGRESS

April 1, 2020

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf:

We write to you during this unprecedented national pandemic to request that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) develop an electronic bond system to ensure families can simultaneously follow guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) while posting bail for detained loved ones.

So far, the United States (U.S.) has over 100,000 cases of novel coronavirus, otherwise known as COVID-19, nationwide and over 2,000 deaths related to the disease. Despite efforts to curb the spread of the virus, the U.S. government is estimating that 200,000 people could die from COVID-19.

Under normal circumstances, outbreaks have occurred in Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities for diseases mostly eradicated in the general population, such as Mumps and Measles. ICE facilities have shown themselves to be ill-prepared to manage more basic outbreaks, and ICE often relies on local medical facilities to treat ill detainees. The novel coronavirus is a significant threat on a far greater scale. Failure to employ all tactics to reduce detention numbers and control the spread of the virus has the real possibility of creating a severe health crisis for detention centers and overwhelming local health care facilities.

Numerous Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) Members, health professionals and doctors have urged DHS to safely and swiftly release detainees in order to prevent an outbreak in DHS detention centers, which would lead to deaths and human suffering. The simplest and most expedited means of release is parole. We urge DHS to immediately use its authority to grant parole to detainees in order to safely reduce detention numbers. Further DHS should continue to expedite all available options for release, including bond.

Detainee family members routinely pay bonds in cash at Enforcement and Removal Office (ERO) offices across the country, often through community bond funds. Paying bonds in cash can be very challenging while families are trying to follow CDC guidance of social distancing. We are aware the ERO has an option that allows families to practice social distancing by paying the bond with a check through the mail. However, we have heard from several individuals that there are often delays in getting detainees released when using the mail-in option. Furthermore, administrative issues can arise with processing checks or paperwork, leading to further delays.

As ERO offices and immigration courts make operational adjustments, we urge you to work on finding a way to remotely process bond payments as quickly as possible. If families feel that the only efficient way to pay bond

is in person, more families and ERO personnel will be exposed to the coronavirus during this pandemic crisis. Further, in some parts of the country, access to ERO offices has been completely shut down as sanitization and quarantine mitigation efforts are deployed, making it impossible for cash obligors to post bond.

To prevent further spread of COVID-19, we are calling on DHS to immediately take measures to permit the processing of bond payments by cash bond obligors through an online system. It is our understanding that an eBonds portal already exists but its only available to commercial surety bond obligors. We urge ICE to work swiftly to allow all cash bond payers to also use this online bond system.

These next few weeks are critical to stopping the exacerbation of a global pandemic. We call on ICE to safely and swiftly release detainees from its custody. Further, ICE must take every step in its power to limit person-to-person contact. One of these steps is allowing for expedited and immediate payment of bonds using the existing eBonds portal.

We thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

Joaquin Castro
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