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Immigration enforcement must always be humane

Amid reports of people dying after being detained for administrative immigration-related reasons, we recently visited the Elizabeth Immigration Detention Center to see firsthand how detainees are being housed.

It is clear that Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Division of Immigration Health Services have difficult challenges on their hands. We certainly believe that the officials we met with are sincere in their efforts to ensure that detention conditions are safe and healthy. However, massive immigration raids that have violated the rights of far too many American citizens, along with weak standards for basic and emergency medical care, have created a system that is often illegal and deadly.

Despite the good intentions of those in charge of the detention centers, unless the broader system is fixed, we will continue to see Americans harassed and detained through no fault of their own, and we will continue to see unnecessary deaths. Regardless of how you feel about our country's immigration problem, we can all agree that American citizens and permanent residents should never get caught up in immigration raids, and we can all agree that a detention should never amount to a death sentence.

While at Elizabeth, we spoke privately with three detainees. Two of them have received no care for serious conditions despite weeks of waiting. Decisions about those patients' treatment may be made by medical professionals who have never even seen them. And if a patient dies, there is no requirement that the deaths be reported to oversight authorities.

If these sorts of basic medical care concerns were evident when a U.S. senator and religious leader visited with plenty of prior notice, one can only imagine the conditions in detention centers with less oversight and less high-profile visitors.

Many of the detainees in Elizabeth were swept up in the federal government's unprecedented crackdown on illegal immigration -- a wave of raids on homes, workplaces and even houses of worship that has resulted in hundreds of thousands of people being locked up in detention centers. Unfortunately, many of them are U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents who simply fit the "profile" targeted by agents.

In other words, raids targeting those who are here illegally have led to the harassment and detention of law-abiding, patriotic Americans and their families. Knowing that doesn't sit right with us, and it probably doesn't sit right with many of you, either.

The dramatic increase in raids and the skyrocketing use of detention is costing taxpayers more than a billion dollars each year. Detention is frequently justified on public safety grounds, even though thousands of detainees are asylum seekers, individuals fleeing from torture, people with serious medical needs, pregnant women and even nursing mothers who pose no safety risk whatsoever.

It is shameful enough to deprive people of their liberty when their only offense is seeking refuge from persecution, but ignoring serious threats to their health after sending them into our prisons and detention centers is both inhumane and unsafe. Recent investigative reports by the Washington Post and New York Times revealed grossly substandard medical care for those in detention, including 83 reported deaths over the last five years.

As such, there must be accountability. Proper medical care for immigrant detainees, especially in an emergency situation, is a human rights issue. If this nation wants to be a beacon of light to the rest of the world, as we subscribe and aspire to be, and if we want to tell other countries about the responsibility of putting human rights first, then we must do everything we can to offer necessary medical care, even to those in custody.

To stop the unlawful detention of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, and provide humane treatment to those who are detained, we are supporting legislation to set legal boundaries on how raids are conducted, reform our detention system and increase the use of alternatives to detention. This legislation will not save those who have already died in immigration detention or suffered indignity there, but it will make a difference to those still being held in prison-like conditions. The legislation would be a step in restoring a sense of security and stability for our communities and the immigrants who live among us.
