



## Messaging Guidance to Challenge the Detention, Deportation and Criminalization of Immigrants

December 2024

**PURPOSE:** As advocates, we are all trying the best we can to make sense of the current moment and we are learning as we go. This document is informed by messaging research led by Detention Watch Network and the Comm/Unity network, and is designed to be a “living document.” We welcome feedback from organizers on the ground.

The purpose of this messaging document is to equip the immigrant rights movement with cohesive messaging to challenge the detention, deportation, and criminalization of immigrants. As we gear up for an increase in rhetoric and policies that are steeped in white supremacy and xenophobia, *and the demonization of community members who have arrests or convictions*, we hope this document can serve as a go-to resource to stay principled in our response on enforcement issues.

### QUICK NAVIGATION JUMP

- [Top 10 post-election messages](#)
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This is a “live” document being updated as needed. Have feedback? Email Jon Rodney, Narrative Strategy Director, IDP and Coordinator for the Comm/Unity network, at [jon@immdefense.org](mailto:jon@immdefense.org) and Carly Pérez Fernández, Communications Director at Detention Watch network, at [cperez@detentionwatchnetwork.org](mailto:cperez@detentionwatchnetwork.org).

## TOP 10 POST-ELECTION MESSAGES:

1. Let us be clear: Trump's return to the White House, and his unprecedented mass deportation and immigration detention agenda, will be catastrophic for all Americans.
2. With Trump 2.0 we expect swift and cruel deportation tactics, like workplace and neighborhood raids and immigration detention expansion, designed to create a media spectacle that will dehumanize and criminalize our immigrant neighbors, friends, family members, and coworkers while also stripping away the limited protections people have to live and work in the United States without fear of being targeted, detained, and exiled from their loved ones.
3. Under the Trump administration so many of our neighbors, members of our family, and friends are at risk. The administration fundamentally thinks immigrants shouldn't be here.
4. We all care about the safety and security of our families and communities. Deporting millions of our immigrant friends and neighbors does nothing to make our communities safe. Trump plans to target people already living in the U.S. and working in areas like agriculture, construction, and medicine to support their families and make our communities better. Instead of spending billions of taxpayer dollars on mass deportations, we should use that money to provide more housing, healthcare options, and education and job training opportunities for everyone to help strengthen our communities.
5. The Trump administration is planning to trample basic civil liberties to carry out mass deportations of our immigrant neighbors and friends, who are beloved members of our communities. Black immigrants and immigrants of color are disproportionately targeted by both local police and ICE. To protect against massive abuses of power, we must defend due process. People charged with a crime have the right to defend themselves in court. And when a person serves their time in jail or prison, they should be able to reunite with their loved ones instead of being subject to the double punishment of detention and deportation. In this moment we must uphold our shared humanity.
6. People are struggling right now, and immigrants are not to blame. Trump's fearmongering of immigrants capitalizes on people's concerns about their economic situation by scapegoating people for problems where our leaders have failed us, including but not limited to the housing crisis, opioid crisis, and rising costs at the grocery store.
  - Greedy corporate landlords, not people seeking refuge and safety in the U.S., are responsible for raising the cost of living for everyone in our community
  - Politicians are playing off of people's concerns about the border to implement harsh policies that separate families and do nothing to make us safer. It is natural for people to move — across states, regions, and countries. And when we do, we contribute skills, food, music and more to enrich our new communities. When we welcome people and interact with one another,

whether on the playground or in the office, our community is enhanced by our differences and united in our shared values.

**Note to advocates:** *while many people in our audiences do have concerns regarding the border, leaning into the phrase and frame of “border security” inherently categorizes people who are migrating as a ‘threat,’ reinforcing damaging policies.*

7. Our elected leaders must depart from the dehumanizing status quo, and be a clear counterpoint to Trump’s cruel deportation and detention agenda. Elected officials as a whole have been woefully silent on immigration, or worse, have enabled the fearmongering against immigrants. This is all a distraction from the fact that the government should be providing more resources to communities across the country so more people have access to things like affordable housing, and quality health care. With Trump and his enablers now coming to power, it is urgent for local leaders to act boldly to rebuke white supremacy by protecting and welcoming immigrants.
8. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are complicit in undermining democracy. ICE and CBP have a record of deceiving the public and committing abuses with near impunity – Congress must cut funding to these abusive and cruel agencies.
9. Detention and deportation deprive people who are immigrants of their liberty, separate them from their loved ones, and exclude them from their communities. This goes against our deepest values.
10. People’s lives should never be used as a bargaining chip, whether they come to the United States seeking safety from persecution, war, and climate change or are already in the United States contributing to their community. Families and communities should be kept intact at home. Policing and incarceration, by design, systemically criminalize Black and Brown people and we will not fall for the Trump Trap to characterize anyone, including immigrants, as unworthy of safety, dignity, and a second chance.

## **CORE VALUES:**

- **Dignity and Respect.** No matter where someone came from or how they arrived in the United States, their life is of value and they should be treated with dignity and respect.
- **Freedom.** Every person has the right to move and live freely, in community and with their family, without fear of being separated from their loved ones or displaced from their home.
- **Unity.** Our strength is our ability to work together as a community enhanced by our differences and united in our shared vision and values. Immigrants are part of our families, workplaces, and places of worship – essential contributors to our communities.
- **Safety.** We all want to feel safe and do whatever we can to keep our loved ones safe. Those seeking safety are not deterred by a maze of bureaucratic red tape or arbitrary changes in immigration policy or even a hateful border wall. They are not deterred because they are trying to achieve what we all want: to live in communities where we can feel welcomed, be with our friends and loved ones, and feel safe.
- **Fairness.** Fairness, freedom and opportunity should be at the core of our immigration system, but our current system isn't set up to uphold these values. Instead, people are deprived of their liberty, separated from their loved ones, and put at risk in ICE custody.

## **CORE PROBLEMS:**

### **THE CRIMINALIZATION OF IMMIGRANTS**

- It can be surprising to learn that the origins of current U.S. immigration policy date back to the 1920s, when many lawmakers believed they could “breed out” bad characteristics in society, a process known as eugenics. They passed laws severely restricting the number of non-white people who could immigrate to try and create a “better” society. Some of those laws have never been repealed and are still enforced today which we expect Trump to capitalize and expand on. We need an immigration system that doesn't care about a person's country of origin, that is welcoming, treats people equally, and with respect and dignity.
  - We need to end race-based prosecution in criminal court for the act of migrating. People who cross the border are seeking safety, freedom, opportunity, or are trying to return home to the U.S. The law that enables these prosecutions was originally authored by Senator Coleman Blease in 1929, a self-described white supremacist.
- The immigration system targets whole groups of people based on the color of their skin. Black immigrants and immigrants of color are routinely and systemically targeted by both local police and by ICE. And we know that people who don't have as much money are treated far worse in the legal system.
- We must protect our state and local resources and make sure that our tax dollars are used for the common good - for jobs, education, housing and healthcare for everyone, not to fuel Trump's agenda of mass deportation and family separation. We must challenge practices that allow the double punishment of community members who

serve their time in prison or jail, earn their release, and are eager to contribute to the fabric of our communities.

**WHO WILL TRUMP TARGET?** The extremists in the Trump cabinet have made clear that they want to see millions of our neighbors torn away and banished from the country we all call home. We need to keep a close eye on how the Trump administration will try to mislead and deceive the public, and sow disconnection and fear, while they are carrying out mass deportations.

- Many people are rightly concerned about safety, and we all deserve to be safe in our communities: to have good schools, livable wages, and affordable housing. When violence or harm is committed, there needs to be a meaningful process of accountability.
- Reliable [research](#) studies have demonstrated that there is no connection between migration and crime rates. Research also [shows](#) that local policies that make sure we use our local tax dollars for the common good, and not to fuel mass deportations, make communities safer.
- As organizers, advocates and community members, we need to step up to challenge the harm to immigrants and their loved ones that's being planned. When we hear politicians demonizing a community member who has had contact with the police, let's remember:
  - Due process is a crucial protection against abuses of power and against becoming a police state. If someone is accused of a crime, they have the right to due process and to defend themselves in a court of law. If we let immigration agents trample due process, that will pave the way to authoritarianism.
  - When a community member serves their time in prison or jail and earns their release, they should be allowed to reunite with their family and contribute to our communities. It's wasteful to subject people who have served their time to the double punishment of detention and deportation.
  - The Trump administration is going to demonize and vilify our immigrant neighbors to justify plans for immense cruelty to huge numbers of people. **In this moment, we need to uplift our shared humanity.** Every person has inherent worth and dignity.

## **SANCTUARY CITIES**

- All residents of our city, regardless of their immigration status, want and deserve to thrive in safe communities.
- Sanctuary policies allow all people to feel safe and welcome in their neighborhoods and ensure that our immigrant neighbors don't have to live with the fear that going about their daily lives or reporting issues to local authorities could lead to the deportation of a loved one. This helps keep all residents safe.
- Study after study show that cities with large immigrant populations are safer than those with less immigrants, and places with sanctuary policies have lower crime rates.
- Our Sanctuary City policies are public safety measures. They help protect our immigrant neighbors from racial profiling and abuses of power and make everyone in our community better off.

## FENTANYL AND SCAPEGOATING

- The nationwide epidemic of drug overdoses is a horrible tragedy—one that is also deeply impacting our country. Our hearts go out to every family that has lost a loved one.
- To address this public health crisis, lawmakers need to implement proven solutions to help our communities. Our families and neighbors need solutions like overdose prevention centers, mobile treatment programs, and fentanyl test strips. Yet instead of focusing on public health and safety and putting real solutions in place, this proposal is focused on scapegoating our neighbors who are immigrants.
  - *If responding to local or state legislation that singles out immigrants:* This proposal ignores the fact that well [over eight in ten](#) people convicted of trafficking fentanyl are U.S. citizens using their vehicles when they drive through an official border crossing.
  - Those who blame immigrants and asylum-seekers for fentanyl aren't serious about fixing the opioid crisis. Instead, they're trying to score political points. Messages designed to divide Americans do more harm than good, and provide no solutions.
- Fentanyl is a serious crisis, and we have to come together to provide serious solutions to make our communities safer for all of us, including people who are immigrants.

## HARMFUL LOCAL AND STATE POLICIES

*Example: OLS in Texas*

- Texas Governor Greg Abbot is exploiting pain and suffering at the border for political gain, and mispending Texas tax dollars to do so. He mispends 25 million dollars each week, and counting, on a failed program called “Operation Lone Star.” This program is the Texas version of Stop and Frisk, which targets Black and brown immigrants and other people of color for arrest and prosecution.
- Imagine a world where the respect for our lives guides how we decide to spend our tax dollars. This is the vision that gives us the courage to unify, support each other, and call for an end to Operation Lone Star.

## IMMIGRATION DETENTION

- Many Americans are shocked to learn that the U.S. government systematically deprives the liberty of hundreds of thousands of immigrants, refugees, and people seeking asylum, creating a system of immigration detention – the largest detention system in the world.
- Immigration detention as a whole is unnecessary, rife with systemic abuses and completely arbitrary.
- From billion dollar profits for private prison corporations, like GEO Group and CoreCivic, to filling the gaps of shrinking local budgets, detention contracts incentivize the incarceration of immigrants as a money making scheme. Whether an ICE detention facility is run by a local government or by a corporation, detention

centers are rife with systemic abuses, medical neglect, and drive perverse profits off of people's lives.

- This year, ICE has shamefully issued two Requests for Information (RFI) for immigration detention facilities in multiple states across the country, in addition to a Request for Proposal for a new facility in New Jersey. At least 15 states face the threat of ICE detention expansion, including: Washington, California, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Kansas, Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, Kentucky, Texas, Idaho, Montana, Nevada and New Jersey.
- ICE's existing expansion plan, now to be bolstered by a Trump administration, will also increase the targeting, racial profiling and arrests of people within their communities based on what they look like, the language they speak, and where they work while further exacerbating the detention system that is rife with abuse.
- ICE's desire to increase the number of people locked up in detention is in deep contrast with local communities where immigrants are welcomed and valued. California, Illinois, Oregon, New Jersey, and Washington have all passed state legislation to phase out immigration detention in their respective states after sustained local organizing, while communities in New Mexico are currently working to pass anti-detention legislation in their state.

## **BORDER ENFORCEMENT**

- The U.S.'s border policies shamefully rely on deterrence and incarceration to punish people for migration, putting people's lives in jeopardy.
- The continued focus on punishing people who migrate for the simple act of moving for a new, better, or safer life is not only cruel, it is ineffective and fuels our country's reliance on mass incarceration that disproportionately targets Black and brown people.
- The Trump administration implemented a racist web of policies during his first term that we expect to be expanded upon, including the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which forced people seeking asylum to remain in Mexico while their cases were being processed, that effectively closed the Southern Border to migrants and eviscerated the U.S. asylum system.
- Black migrants have been disproportionately impacted by harmful immigration policies, like Title 42, and are much more likely to be deported — facing inhumane, violent treatment at our border.

## **ICE AND CBP**

- ICE and CBP are plagued by egregiously poor conditions and a culture of violence that results in system-wide abuses, including death. The federal government wastes more and more money each year, peaking at \$28 billion in Fiscal Year 2024 on ICE and CBP to profile, jail, and deport immigrants.
- Immigration enforcement – the targeting, detention, and deportation of people – is fundamentally fraught with inhumane conditions, a lack of accountability and a culture of violence. A 2024 report found that [nearly all deaths in ICE custody over 5 years were preventable](#) while [316 people have died as the result of encounters with](#)

[CBP agents since January 2010](#). The agencies' records of abuse are well-documented by immigrant rights advocates and the Department of Homeland Security's own Office of Inspector General.

- Lives are in jeopardy under ICE and CBP custody. Every detention and deportation represents a family separation that causes trauma to children, families, and communities.
- ICE and CBP racially profile and separate people from their loved ones and community every day based on what they look like, the language they speak, and where they work.

## **CORE SOLUTIONS:**

- Instead of fighting over a piece of the pie, we can make the whole pie bigger—and our immigrant friends and neighbors, current and future, are part of that solution. That looks like investing in education, housing for all income levels, climate resilient infrastructure and health care. When taxpayer dollars are invested in what we care about, we have more than enough resources for everyone to live a fulfilled life.
- In the face of another Trump administration, members of Congress should vehemently and vocally reject the Trump administration's hateful attacks on immigrant communities.
- Our elected officials must build support for the years to come to make our society better for everyone. That looks like simplifying the immigration process by allowing people to be with their loved ones and work upon arrival, so they can immediately support their families and contribute to their communities. People should be able to access help, if they need it, from community-based programs.
- There are examples clearly showing that when we try, the U.S. can welcome immigrants with dignity and respect. Take, for instance, what happened when thousands of people fled Ukraine in 2022, arrived in the U.S., and were resettled quickly and with as much dignity as possible. Officials at the federal, state, and local level coordinated with civic organizations and sponsors to develop plans on where to settle people. They also issued work permits for new arrivals so they could support themselves and their families. While this took effort, it was something elected officials across the country were able to pull off. It can—and should—serve as a model for the future.
- Our elected officials need to hear from us and act urgently! Detention and deportations strip people of their dignity, separate loved ones and hurt communities. Members of Congress must take swift action to protect people.
- People are uniting to protect immigrant family members, friends, coworkers, and neighbors by calling to shut down existing detention centers and blocking ICE proposals to build new ones.
- Simply put, people navigating their immigration case should be able to do so with their families and in the community -- not behind bars in immigration detention.
  - For those who need support, they can access it through optional community based support programs by local nonprofits. Many people in detention have been living in the country for years and are established members of their communities with their families. Moreover, people seeking asylum often have

strong community ties with loved ones waiting to welcome them to the United States.

<b>Think critically about these terms</b>	<b>Because</b>	<b>Alternative approaches</b>
"Criminals, felons"	The Trump administration is going to apply this label to huge numbers of people, from undocumented immigrants to people who've been stopped or arrested by police or who have served their time in prison or jail, and possibly political opponents. It can feel tempting to say, well, this term shouldn't mean "us," it should mean that other group of people - "bad people." But this kind of binary reasoning is going to reinforce a narrative of dehumanization that will harm us all.	We can uplift the importance of due process in preventing abuses of power, talk about what our affirmative vision of safety looks like in our communities and how immigrants are part of that vision, and more!
"Deport felons not families"	People who have a past conviction and served their time are also family members, friends, loved ones, and a vital part of our communities. And we can't forget that outcomes in the justice system can hinge on what we look like - or how much we can afford to pay.	
Asylum-seeker, detainee	People-centered language can help overcome the "othering" of immigrants in the current discourse.	People seeking asylum, people who have suffered in detention