

Faith leaders sue county board over ICE contract vote

Some pastors are also asking whether the county should be profiting from immigration detention.

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue



Seven religious leaders in New Jersey have sued their county board for violating an open meetings law.

[The lawsuit](#), filed August 27 by attorneys from the American Civil Liberties Union who are representing the leaders, charges that the Hudson County board “has flouted its obligations under the Sunshine Law by voting to renew a contract with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in a process that reeked of secrecy and deception.”

The faith leaders, most of whom are Protestant pastors, have advocated for immigrant rights and opposed the detention of immigrants and what they believe are unsafe conditions in detention, the lawsuit noted.

A correctional center in the county has had a contract to receive payment for holding immigrant detainees since before ICE was formed as an agency.

The county board had announced that the vote on renewing the contract at its July 12 meeting was postponed, according to an ACLU statement.

“However, after the meeting began,” the statement said, the board “added the ICE contract back onto the agenda and rapidly voted to renew the contract, over the vocal opposition of two individual freeholders and those activists who happened to attend.”

Anthony Vainieri, chair of the board, has said the county practice of holding detainees—most of whom are from New York—permits them to be closer to their family and other visitors, the *Jersey Journal* reported. The newspaper wrote that the county expected to receive \$19.3 million from ICE this year.

Elaine Ellis Thomas, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Hoboken, told Episcopal News Service that families are often denied access to those held in the jail or live too far away to be able to visit.

“We want people to know that there are faith leaders, and there are Christians, who believe that we’re not on the side of the rich and the powerful,” she said, “but on the side of the poor and the oppressed.”

Thomas Murphy, rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and Church of the Incarnation in Jersey City, wrote to ENS that the county board should have to redo the vote with more public input.

“My hope is that this free and open discussion will allow for reflection on whether Hudson County should be in this business at all and, especially, if the county should be profiting from the misery of the detainees,” he wrote.

A version of this article, which was edited September 7, appears in the print edition under the title “Faith leaders sue county for deception in vote on its contract with ICE.”