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Detention Conditions Documentation Project

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Since 1996, immigrant rights advocates have sought to redress the expanding use of detention for immigrants and asylum seekers who seek relief in the United States. In many cases, however, advocacy efforts to reform the detention system have been thwarted by a lack of coordinated statistical and anecdotal data on detention conditions.

In response to this problem, the National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC), a program of Heartland Alliance, began to document violations of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention standards. NIJC gathers data through client interaction, incident reports, and post-release questionnaires. The information is entered into a user-friendly internet-based database developed specifically for this project. The database is available to advocates nationwide. It will protect the privacy of individual clients while enabling users to track local, regional, and system-wide problems. We believe that a coordinated effort to document violations of the ICE standards will provide all interested parties with reliable, fact-based data from which to launch advocacy efforts.

To date, the project has collected nearly 200 surveys from NIJC clients and over 50 surveys from partners around the nation. The findings are striking, revealing that detainees face serious obstacles as they strive to access legal counsel and obtain health care in custody. The hard data collected by the project has already helped to bolster the arguments made by advocates for increased compliance with the ICE standards. It will also prove useful in litigation if advocacy alone fails to improve conditions.

The project can have a greater impact if surveys are submitted on a regular basis by legal aid providers and their clients around the nation. To assist legal aid providers participate fully, NIJC staff members are currently available as a resource. Our staff members are able to:

- Send and receive post-release questionnaires on detention conditions to clients and formerly detained immigrants who are willing to share their experiences, anonymously if requested;
- Record incidents of ICE detention standards violations reported by detainees; and
- Enter information in a web-based database that can be accessed by advocates nationwide for their own advocacy and public education efforts.

To learn more about NIJC's detention documentation project, please contact Claudia Valenzuela at 312.660.1308 or cvalenzuela@heartlandalliance.org. Further information about the National Immigrant Justice Center is available at www.immigrantjustice.org.