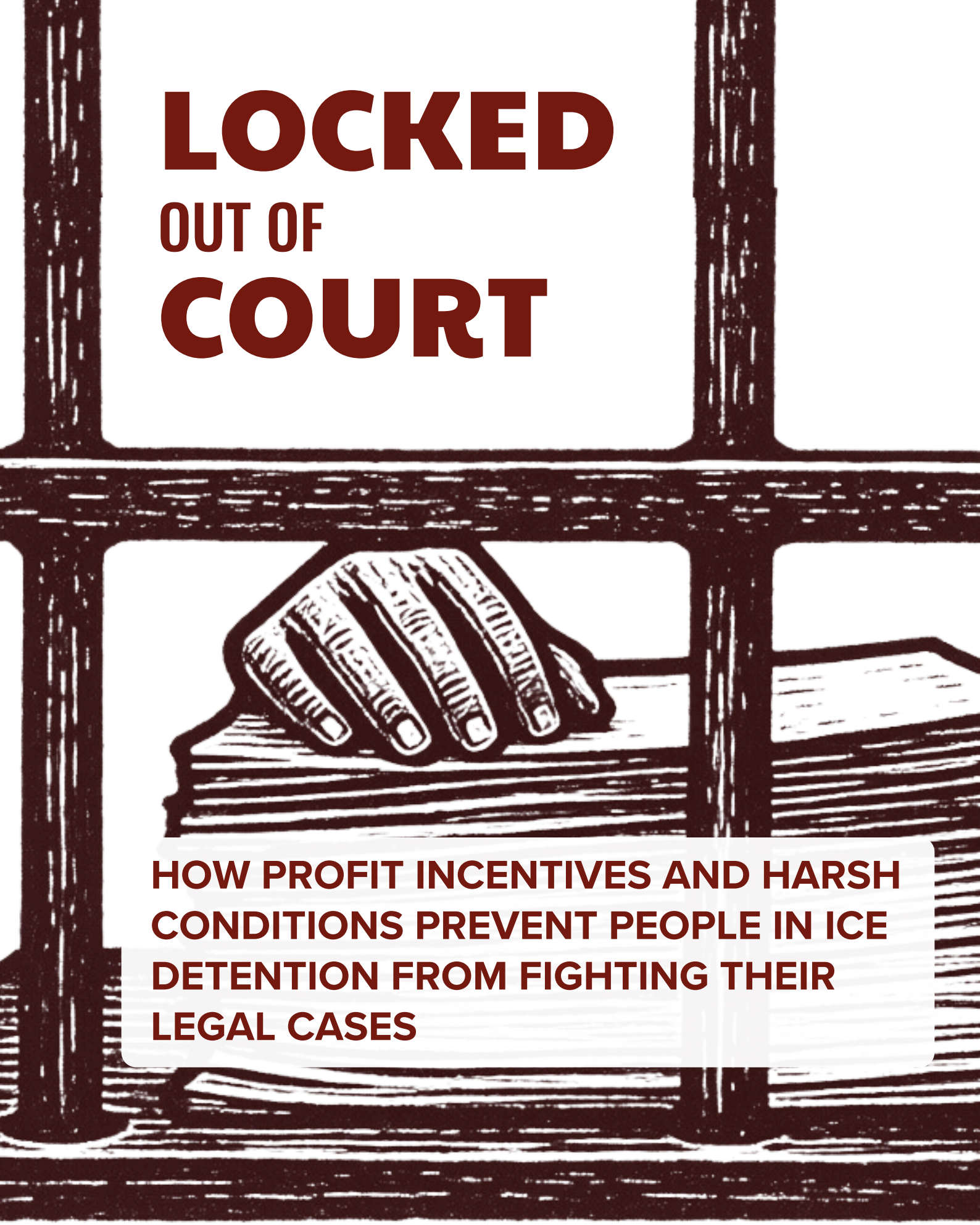
LOCKED OUT OF COURT



HOW PROFIT INCENTIVES AND HARSH CONDITIONS PREVENT PEOPLE IN ICE DETENTION FROM FIGHTING THEIR LEGAL CASES

CCIJ | CALIFORNIA COLLABORATIVE FOR IMMIGRANT JUSTICE

NOVEMBER 4, 2026

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HOW PROFIT INCENTIVES AND HARSH CONDITIONS PREVENT PEOPLE IN ICE DETENTION FROM FIGHTING THEIR LEGAL CASES

California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice[1]

November 4, 2026

[1] *The California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice (CCIJ) is a nonprofit organization that fights for the liberation of immigrants in detention through coordination, advocacy, and legal services. We thank the people detained in Kern County who trusted us to document their experiences, as well as Pangea Legal Services, Asian Law Caucus, and the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

People facing deportation have the right to a “reasonable opportunity” to examine the evidence against them, to present their own evidence, and to apply for any relief from removal for which they qualify.[2] **The detention centers in Kern County uniformly impede this right.**

Immigration law is extremely complicated. Even lawyers struggle with the complexity of immigration cases, especially when people are in detention. There are more than 20 forms of relief from deportation. Each has its own eligibility requirements, and the applicant must prove each requirement with significant evidence including witness statements, news articles, and even expert declarations. Å whole industry of practice advisories, treatises, manuals, technical-assistance hotlines, and resource libraries exists to help immigration attorneys.[4] As the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit put it, "Navigating the asylum system with an attorney is hard enough; navigating it without an attorney is a Herculean task."[5]

Kern County has the largest concentration of people detained in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody in California; more than 2,500 people have been held in its four facilities so far this year: California City Detention Facility (CCDF), Central Valley Annex (CVA), Golden State Annex (GSA), and Mesa Verde Detention Facility (MVDF).[6] The private companies that run these facilities are paid handsomely: CoreCivic's CCDF contract is worth up to about $262 million through August 2027, and GEO Group's contract covering MVDF, GSA, and CVA is worth up to about $1.69 billion through 2034.[7]

We found that the companies’ profit motive, which also contributes to generally inhumane conditions, make it impossible for the people detained in Kern County to have even a “reasonable opportunity” to fight their cases.

[2] *See 8 U.S.C. § 1229a(b)(4).*

[3] *See ILRC, Immigration Relief Toolkit §§ 17.3-17.26 (Dec. 2024), https://www.ilrc.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/%C2%A7%20N.17%20Immigration%20Relief%20Toolkit%20-%20Updated%20December%202024.pdf, at 11, 22, 30-31, 39, 41, 50.*

[4] *See, e.g., Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC), https://www.ilrc.org/; American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), https://www.aila.org/; National Immigration Litigation Alliance (NILA), https://immigrationlitigation.org/; ASISTA, https://asistahelp.org/; National Immigration Project (NIPNLG), https://nipnlg.org/; Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC), https://cliniclegal.org/.*

[5] *Usubakunov v. Garland, 16 F.4th 1299 (9th Cir. 2021).*

[6] *Keith Mizuguchi, Central Valley Volunteer Network Helps ICE Detainees Get Back Home, KQED (Oct. 26, 2026), https://www.kqed.org/news/12106375/central-valley-volunteer-network-helps-ice-detainees-get-back-home.*

[7] *USASpending.gov, Award 70CDCR25D00000010 (CoreCivic), https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_IDV_70CDCR25D00000010_7012; USASpending.gov, Award 70CDCR20D00000008 (GEO Group), https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_IDV_70CDCR20D00000008_7012 (both accessed Oct. 28, 2026).*

Methodology

CCIJ provides monthly legal consultations to unrepresented people at MVDF and GSA, and through that work, unrepresented people at CCDF and CVA learn of us and reach out for help. In our conversations, detained people routinely tell us about delays and barriers in getting legal materials, gathering evidence, printing and copying, and mailing their filings on time.

This report draws on CCIJ's interviews and conversations with people detained in Kern County from August 2026 through October 2026, unless otherwise noted. **We examined detained people's ability to:**

- **Use computers and access legal materials.**
- **Seek and obtain evidence** (witness statements, country conditions reports, photographs) without internet access, through incoming mail, tablets, phone calls, and the law library.
- **Print and make copies** of forms, declarations, and briefs, which must be filed with the court and also served on DHS.
- **Mail out applications, evidence, and briefs in a timely manner** to the courts and to DHS. Deadlines can be short; immigration court hearings have recently been advanced with only 10 days' notice. Where we could, we corroborated mailing and receipt dates against detained people's own mail logs, date-stamped envelopes, tracking numbers, and public federal district and appellate court dockets.

Detention Centers in California



Our Findings

Every facility falls short on at least one of the four points, and mail failures are the most consistent. Facilities routinely deliver incoming legal mail to people days or weeks after it arrives, and outgoing filings sit in the facility for days. **People have missed deadlines, lost appeals, been denied bond, and been deported as a result of these delays.**

Mail delays are consistent in all four detention centers. People have missed deadlines, lost appeals, been denied bond, and been deported as a result of these delays.

The profit incentive drives many of these barriers. Private companies receive taxpayer money to operate the facilities in Kern County, and by design they exploit every opportunity available to maximize profit. The companies make the people they detain pay in order to exercise their right to fight their cases: for postage, phone calls, and tablet time. These costs come on top of new and increased government fees, including a yearly $100 fee to apply for asylum.[8] People must pay in order to call most lawyers.

Private companies make the people they detain pay in order to exercise their right to fight their cases: for postage, phone calls, and tablet time.

At the same time, the for-profit prison companies rely on detained people to cook and clean at their facilities for as little as $1 a day; appear to understaff in critical areas including those related to mail processing; and provide restricted access to functional computers, tablets, and printing and copying.

The facilities cut people off from the information and resources they need to fight their cases. Legal databases and forms made available to people in detention are outdated, missing, or shut off after limited use; resource guides and country conditions materials are unavailable; and staff ration access to the few working computers.

[8] *AILA, New Immigration Fees Authorized by the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" (July 23, 2025), https://assets.aila.org/files/cdb2e151-47ed-4b2a-96b7-0590274ffacd/OBBBA-Fees-Flyer.pdf; U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement, National Detention Standards § 5.6(II)(H) (rev. 2025) [hereinafter NDS 2025]; U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement, Performance-Based National Detention Standards 2011 § 5.8(V)(K), at 406 (rev. Dec. 2016) [hereinafter PBNDS 2011].*

Our Findings

Harsh conditions contribute to these barriers. People in solitary confinement report going weeks without access to copies or printing; recurrent lockdowns prevent people from accessing computers and legal resources; at one facility, the librarian reportedly turns away people who do not speak English.

Solitary confinement and recurrent lockdowns prevent people from accessing computers and legal resources.

Facilities withdraw legal access as punishment. At two facilities, people told us they lost access to legal research, communications, and stamps after collective protests or complaints about inhumane conditions.

The detention system, including the spread of for-profit operators, functions to facilitate rapid deportation.

The detention system, including the spread of for-profit operators, functions to facilitate rapid deportation, at the expense of permitting people to exercise their right to a reasonable opportunity to examine the evidence against them, to present their own evidence, and to apply for relief from removal for which they qualify.



CALIFORNIA CITY DETENTION FACILITY (CCDF)

CCDF is a former state prison that ICE began using in August 2025. With 2,560 beds, it is the largest immigration detention facility in California. In July 2026, the Department of Homeland Security bought the facility from CoreCivic for $732.6 million. CoreCivic continues to operate the facility under a direct contract with ICE.[9] CCDF held about 1,426 people on an average day in 2026. CoreCivic expects about $130 million a year in revenue from CCDF, its contract is worth up to about $262 million, and ICE had committed about $147 million as of February 2026.[10] Unlike the other three facilities, CCDF's contract with ICE requires it to follow the less stringent 2025 National Detention Standards (NDS).

Although an October 19 letter from the ACLU of Northern California alerted CCDF to many of the issues described below, the problems persist.[11]

Access to computers and legal materials

No law library, and one computer per housing pod. CCDF has no law library.[12] People told us that each pod of up to 88 people shares a single computer and that people often line up to use it. The computer has immigration court, BIA, and USCIS forms, and a habeas form. We received multiple reports that many of the forms are out of date. The computer does not have any other forms, including those for Ninth Circuit petitions for review and state court post-conviction relief. The computer also has a database with case decisions and statutes, and we received multiple reports that the case law is a year old or older. While an updated version of the database is also available on tablets, people may use it for only an hour per day. The facility provides no materials to help people represent themselves, even though ICE maintains a website that purports to do just that.[13]

[9] *Cal. Dep't of Justice, Immigration Detention in California (May 2026), https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/media/immigration-detention-2026.pdf, at 13-14, 143-45 [hereinafter AG Report]; Wendy Fry & Nigel Duara, Private prison company sells two of California's immigrant detention centers to the feds, CalMatters (July 6, 2026), https://calmatters.org/justice/2026/07/corecivic-sells-ice-detention-centers/; TRAC, Detention Facilities Average Daily Population (data as of July 9, 2026), https://tracreports.org/immigration/detentionstats/facilities.html.*

[10] *CoreCivic, Press Release (Sept. 29, 2025), https://ir.corecivic.com/node/24926/pdf; USASpending.gov, Award 70CDCR25D00000010, supra.*

[11] *ACLU of N. Cal., Letter to California City Detention Center (Oct. 19, 2026), https://www.aclunorcal.org/app/uploads/2026/10/2026.10.19-Letter-to-Cal-City-Center.pdf.*

[12] *AG Report at 160-61 (calling the lack of a law library a "plain violation of NDS").*

[13] *See U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement, ICE Portal, https://portal.ice.gov/home. People reported being able to see an application on their tablets called "ICE Portal" that they were not able to access.*

Lockdowns cut off access. People reported frequent lockdowns (periods when people are locked in their two-person cells) during which they cannot access the computer or the phones. The facility counts its population four times a day, locking people in their cells up to 60 minutes or more each time. Staff have also used lockdowns as collective punishment. For example, in March 2026, staff locked down an entire pod for 24 hours after a fight between two people. In April 2026, case managers threatened pod-wide lockdowns and tear gas for the next "incident," meaning anyone raising a concern about conditions at the facility, such as feeling unsafe in their pod.

We were told that multiple people accepted removal orders because they could not, or did not know how to, work on their cases in solitary confinement.

Solitary confinement. We received reports that in the men's segregation housing unit (solitary confinement), people could use the unit's sole computer only when staff let people into the dayroom for one hour a day, and that tablet access was limited. Women in solitary confinement live in the top tiers of the women's general population units, so whenever they leave their cells, including to use the unit's sole computer, guards lock down the women held in general population below. We were told that multiple people accepted removal orders because they could not, or did not know how to, work on their cases in solitary confinement.

Confiscation of legal materials. One person reported that staff took all four of his USB drives, which held all his legal work, "for investigation" when they moved him to solitary confinement, and held them for at least four days. They also took his address books and some of his legal papers.



Access to printing and copies

Irregular and capped printing and copies. People told us that only one staff person prints materials for detained people. The staff person visits each pod of 88 people every other day, at unpredictable times. At times, the staff person will make copies but refuse to print legal documents, including forms. When one person asked to print certificates for education programs he finished on the facility's tablet, both the staff person and his counselor told him it was "not my job"; someone outside had to print and mail them in. People also reported that printing and copying are limited to 10 pages per person, but that the staff person will relax the rule if other staff are not around to see.

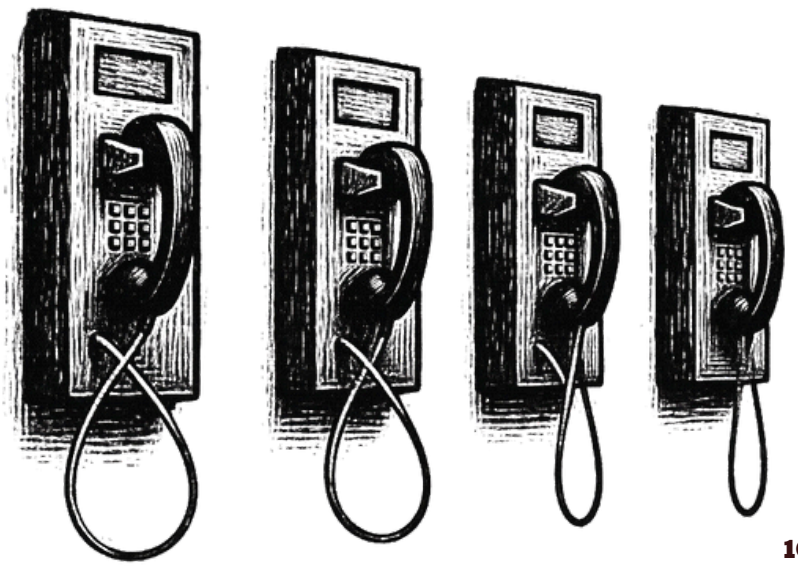
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No access in solitary confinement. In solitary confinement, the printing staff rarely or never come. One person reported that the printing staff had not come in three weeks and that staff told him people are supposed to request it. Another reported that staff began coming only after he filed a grievance, after more than three weeks without access.

Ability to timely mail out applications, evidence, and briefs

Expensive and inconsistent access to phones and tablets. People pay for outgoing phone calls and to send messages. Lawyers and others helping people with their cases pay 25 cents for each message they send, and each message is subject to a 1,500-character limit. The lockdowns also cut off phone and tablet access. In solitary confinement, people are only able to use a phone or tablet if staff bring it to them, a process that results in communication delays.

In September 2026, people in one pod reported that staff turned off their tablets in retaliation for raising complaints about being denied outdoor recreation time.



Delayed, lost, and rejected incoming legal mail. Mail logs that detained people kept in September and October 2026 show repeated delays in incoming legal mail, including legal mail arriving one to two weeks late, even when sent overnight.

These delays have undermined people's ability to access the courts and their counsel. For example:

- The BIA mailed one person his briefing deadline and hearing transcripts on August 31, but it did not reach him until September 22, a day after his brief was due. He lost his appeal and now must seek review in the Ninth Circuit.
- ICE's response and motion to dismiss in a habeas case, sent September 30, reached the petitioner October 6, one day before his reply was due.
- The Eastern District of California mailed findings and recommendations on October 7 and gave eight days to respond. The recipient got them October 20, after the deadline.
- As of October 14, CoreCivic had not located documents a spouse sent by Express on October 8 for a habeas reply, and another Express envelope that reached the facility October 5 still had not been delivered.
- Express legal mail that arrived September 29 was not delivered until October 2.
- Mail from the BIA and the Federal Defender sent October 8 and 9 was delivered October 14.
- An elderly man's wife paid $96.21 to send him legal documents by Express mail from Florida on October 16. Tracking shows they reached the facility October 21, but as of October 28 he had not received them, and guards say they do not have them.
- An attorney reported that a mailing delivered to the facility December 12, 2025, reached the client in solitary confinement on the night of December 15.
- Another attorney's mail was delivered May 26, 2026, and had not reached the client by June 5.
- A Texas attorney reported in April 2026 that mail she sent two weeks earlier had not arrived.
- A legal services organization reported that at least three times over the past year, legal mail was returned with no explanation except a stamp that said "RTS" (return to sender) on the envelope, or because the recipient allegedly was not at the facility. The organization confirmed each time that the intended recipient was indeed at the facility.

Mail logs that detained people kept in September and October 2026 show repeated delays in incoming legal mail, including legal mail arriving one to two weeks late, even when sent overnight.

People told us that when they pick up incoming mail, they are asked to sign a release roster backdated to show an earlier delivery date. In June 2026, one person reported that mail staff opened legal mail from counsel in front of him, flipped through the pages, and removed a copy of the facility's publicly available contract[14] for "investigation." It was never returned. Staff also appear to be inconsistent, and possibly selective, about which mail they process promptly.[15]

Limited envelopes and postage. People reported that staff will not hand out USPS envelopes, though they have been told the facility has plenty. Instead, staff give out one manila envelope at a time. Copies of filings in immigration legal cases must be sent both to court and to a DHS attorney, at different addresses. To get the second envelope needed to serve the government a court filing, people must borrow someone else's or "beg" a counselor, who often promises one "later" but never returns.

Commissary sells stamps once a week and limits purchases: in January 2026, one person reported that the most anyone could buy was three stamps (one stamp covers about seven pages), and stamps were sold out. Express mail with tracking costs at least $25, but one person reported that mail staff never provide the actual tracking number used. At least three people reported that they were unaware of or did not have access to certified mail, meaning that the only way to have their mail tracked was by paying $25. Though express and tracked mail are critical given the facility's mail problems, people who have no funds and nobody to financially support them (referred to as "indigent" in the National Detention Standards) have no recourse, because the facility provides them only with stamps.



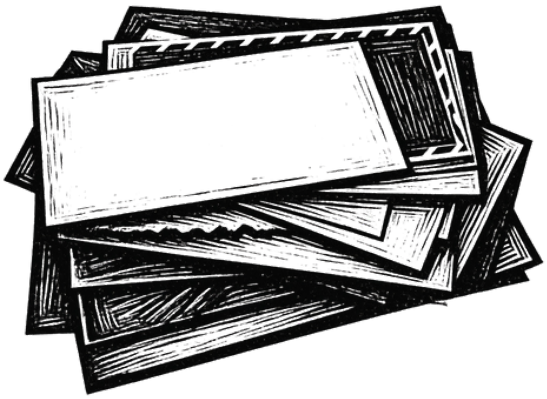
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[14] *U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement, Contract No. 70CDCR25D00000010, Modification P00004 (California City Detention Facility), https://www.ice.gov/doclib/foia/detFacContracts/70CDCR25D00000010_P00004_CaliforniaCityCDF_CaliforniaCityCA.pdf.*

[15] *For example, CCIJ recently mailed several people legal documents using express mail, with self-addressed stamped envelopes so they could mail legal documents back. Our mail reached them two days after arriving at the facility, and their return mail left the facility within two days. A two-day delay can still matter and violates the NDS. But detained people report that staff may prioritize mail based on how an envelope looks, and our envelopes all bore our organization's name and logo.*

No way to confirm mail was sent. No mail staff come into the housing units, and people have no mailbox; they hand outgoing mail to counselors, unit managers, or officers, who will not sign for it. People authorize staff to charge postage to their accounts, but they never get a receipt or tracking number, and many never see the charge, which suggests the mail never went out. Counselors keep a mail log for each person, but can simply omit mail that staff lose. One person paid extra for overnight mail, but staff did not send his documents that way, and the immigration judge did not get them before his court date.

People authorize staff to charge postage to their accounts, but they never get a receipt or tracking number, and many never see the charge, which suggests the mail never went out.



Delayed outgoing mail and lost filings. Facility policy requires staff to process legal mail every weekday, but people report that outgoing mail takes two to three days to leave the facility, and sometimes much longer. Mail logs and other reports show:

- An appeal mailing provided to staff on August 18 was not sent out until August 31. It took around seven days to reach the BIA.
- A BIA appeal mailing provided to staff on October 16 had not been received as of November 2.
- An appeal placed in the mailbox for Express mailing on September 13 reached the BIA September 21, four days after its September 17 deadline. The appeal was denied.
- Legal mail to the BIA left for Express mailing October 2 was not sent until October 6.
- A Ninth Circuit appeal given to staff on September 30 was received on October 13; case-opening papers mailed from the Ninth Circuit on October 13 were received October 21; and a brief provided to staff on October 19 was docketed October 27.

The consequences of these delays are severe. Detained people told us they hear every day from people whose legal mail did not reach the court on time, and that some people have been deported because of delays.

WHAT THE NATIONAL DETENTION STANDARDS REQUIRE AT CCDF

- **Law library.** A designated law library with "an adequate number of computers," the ability to print and make copies, inspected weekly, with materials kept updated. NDS 2025 § 6.3(II)(A)-(B), (E), at 185-86.
- **Solitary confinement.** The same law library access as the general population, absent compelling security concerns, and never denied as discipline. § 6.3(II)(F), (L), at 186, 188-89.
- **Personal legal materials.** People may keep all personal legal material, including in segregation. § 6.3(II)(K), at 188.
- **Copies and printing.** Free copies and printing of legal material, as many as needed, denied only for security, illegality, or abuse. § 6.3(II)(H), at 187.
- **Mail timing.** Incoming mail delivered within 24 hours of receipt; outgoing mail to the postal service by the next business day. § 5.1(II)(C), at 148.
- **Legal mail.** Staff may not read legal mail. § 5.1(II)(E)(2), at 148-49.
- **Envelopes and postage.** Free envelopes for everyone; no limit on mail sent at one's own expense; free postage for at least five pieces of legal mail a week for people who are indigent. § 5.1(II)(H)-(I), at 150; § 6.3(II)(M), at 189.
- **Certified mail.** Help with certified mail and similar needs for legal matters. § 6.3(II)(N), at 189.
- **Phones.** Reasonable and equitable access to telephones, including in solitary confinement. § 5.4(II)(E), (G), at 158-60.

DETENTION STANDARDS VIOLATIONS

CCDF is violating these National Detention Standards:

- § 6.3(II)(A)-(B): no law library, and one computer for each[16] pod of 88 people.
- § 6.3(II)(E): outdated case law and forms.
- § 6.3(II)(F), (L): restricted access in solitary confinement, and frequent lockdowns that cut off access, including as collective punishment.
- § 6.3(II)(K): seizing a person's USB drives holding his legal work when staff moved him to solitary confinement.
- § 6.3(II)(H): caps on copies, refusals to print, and weeks without copies or printing in solitary confinement.
- § 5.1(II)(C): delivering incoming legal mail days or weeks after it arrives, and holding outgoing legal mail for days or weeks.
- § 5.1(II)(E)(2): reading through legal mail and removing a document from it.
- § 5.1(II)(H)-(I): limits on stamp purchases, and envelopes handed out one at a time.
- § 6.3(II)(N): failing to make certified mail available to people who need it for legal matters.
- § 5.4(II)(E), (G): lockdowns cutting off all phone access for 24 hours, and delays bringing phones to people in solitary confinement.

[16] *NDS 2025, supra.*

CENTRAL VALLEY ANNEX (CVA)

CVA, in McFarland, is a 700-bed former state prison that GEO Group operates. It held people for the U.S. Marshals until ICE began detaining people there in April 2026, as an "annex" to GEO's MVDF contract. GEO Group's contract covering MVDF, GSA, and CVA is worth up to about $1.69 billion through 2034; ICE committed about $5.9 million for CVA in April 2026. CVA is bound by the 2011 Performance-Based National Detention Standards (PBNDS).

Access to computers and legal materials

A law library few can use. People told us the law library is open Monday through Friday. Each dorm of 80 or more people gets a three-hour block per day, and only five people per dorm may attend at a time. People must wake early to sign up and negotiate with others for a spot. The computers do not have forms and applications; instead, people must request them from the librarian, which takes about 24 hours. Until August 2026, the computers did not have access to case law or statutes; although they do now, the database is not regularly updated. People also reported that there is no way to search the case law or statutes, in the same way that one can on tablets. The only books are the federal code, dictionaries, and leisure reading.

People reported that the librarian will not provide services in languages other than English, and so the only way for non-English speakers to receive assistance, including the printing of forms and applications, is if they are in the library with another detained person who can translate for them.

No way to save work. The dorms have no computers. The law library computers cannot save files, and there are no thumb drives available, so people are forced to print their work from the library computers and retype it at their next visit.

Limited access to tablets. Each dorm has about 20 tablets, about one for every four people. Use of the legal database is limited to two hours a day. There are no resources for self-representation available on the tablets.

People told us the law library is open Monday through Friday. Each dorm of 80 or more people gets a three-hour block per day, and only five people per dorm may attend at a time.

Access taken away as punishment. Following peaceful sit-ins across two separate pods over the lack of A/C and commissary access, staff took away access to tablets, which, unlike the library computers, have updated cases and statutes as well as the ability to search. One person in solitary confinement reported that he was never informed he could go to the law library, and when he stated he wanted to call the media to report conditions, his access to the tablet was taken away.

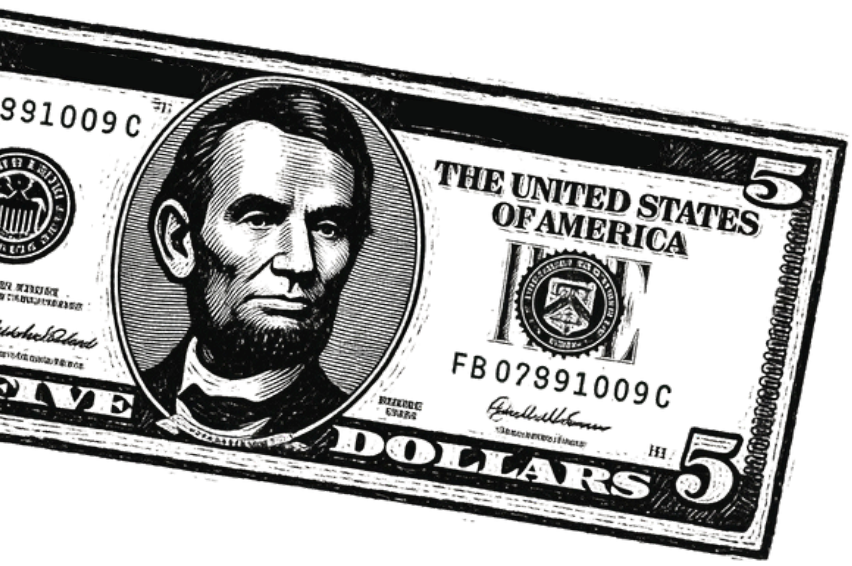
Access to printing and copies

People can print and copy only at the law library, so the same access limits apply. Each document must be legal work, and a detained person reported that the librarian reads what people print and copy. She has pushed back on requests, resisting printing one person's medical records before eventually allowing it. People who do not speak English, including Spanish speakers, are reportedly sent back to the dorm if a detained person is unavailable to translate their needs to the librarian.

Following peaceful sit-ins across two separate pods over the lack of A/C and commissary access, staff took away access to tablets, which, unlike the library computers, have updated cases and statutes as well as the ability to search.

Ability to timely mail out applications, evidence, and briefs

Paying to communicate. Five dollars buys about 40 minutes of calls to any U.S. number, plus hidden fees, including a charge to start each call. A detained person told us the calls to both the immigration court and the district court cost money but go unanswered. Although some lawyers can be called for free, the vast majority cannot be.



Five dollars buys about 40 minutes of calls to any U.S. number, plus hidden fees, including a charge to start each call.

Delayed incoming mail and improper mail handling. We received multiple reports of delayed incoming mail, in some cases with drastic consequences.

- One mail officer handles mail for about 700 people, and people reported that he prepares it improperly. One person reported that after his family sent him legal mail including support letters, the mail officer tried to return it to the sender, stating that "only lawyers can send you legal mail."
- Several people reported receiving notices that their appeals were defective too late to be able to address the issues. At least two people were removed, to Mexico and El Salvador.
- In another case, a rejection notice dated August 31 arrived September 28, 15 days after the deadline to correct the filing; the person had refiled in advance only because he had seen this happen to others.
- Another received a rejection notice dated August 1, 2026, on August 28, 2026, 14 days after the BIA's deadline.
- An asylum applicant had his evidence sent by express mail in order to meet his evidentiary deadline, but it was not delivered to him until more than 48 hours later, the morning of his hearing.

Limited or no access to stamps. People may buy stamps only from the commissary: orders are due Monday at midnight and arrive Thursday or Friday afternoon, after mail has gone out. Moreover, following the sit-ins described previously, staff also took away commissary privileges, which is the only way detained people can buy stamps. The facility restricted one person's commissary until November 5 and told him he could not receive stamps from family, so he could not mail his reply in his habeas case. Another person who needed to mail a habeas petition had his commissary capped at $25 as punishment, though the stamps for the filing would cost about $30. Another could not mail his asylum evidence package because of commissary restrictions.

People may buy stamps only from the commissary.

The facility restricted one person's commissary until November 5 and told him he could not receive stamps from family, so he could not mail his reply in his habeas case.



Inexplicable postage pricing and policies. Detained people reported inconsistent pricing on first class mail sent to similar locations: two envelopes sent to Sacramento with 100 pages each were priced at $10.48; one envelope with 1 page sent to Bakersfield was priced at $14; while another with 50 pages cost $11.

In October, a mail officer required detained people requesting certified mail to also pay for stamps for the same envelope. Detained people filed grievances multiple times a day until, six days later, staff clarified that stamps were not required in order to use certified mail services. However, during that period, at least one detained person using certified mail reported: “I was lucky enough to find stamps from another detainee. I could’ve easily missed another deadline and have my case more vulnerable.”

The facility recently eliminated Priority and Express mail without notice. Certified mail is now the only way to send filings with tracking.

Restricted access to envelopes. One person reported that after participating in the grievances described immediately above, mail staff stopped providing free envelopes for mailings and now require people to buy envelopes from the commissary. Previously, envelopes were distributed by the facility’s sole mail officer; if he was not present, then there was no way to obtain envelopes.

Delayed outgoing mail and improper mail handling.

- In one case, the mail officer put the certified mail label over the address, and the filing never reached the court; the immigration judge let the person resend it after he showed his tracking information.
- One individual attempted to mail evidence via express mail, but was rejected due to the facility’s sudden change in policy to stop offering express and priority mail services. The individual missed his deadline.
- Certified mail given to staff on September 9 did not leave the facility until September 12. The person missed the court’s deadline and was not refunded the $23 he paid for the mailing.
- Another person mailed evidence for his cancellation of removal case (his children's birth certificates, records from his psychologist, and letters of recommendation) by regular mail without tracking on September 18, ten days before his hearing. The court did not receive it on time and ordered him removed. He gave staff his BIA appeal on October 6 and, when we spoke with him on October 19, the BIA could not confirm having received it.
- Two people paid for certified mail but were provided with fake tracking numbers.

WHAT THE NATIONAL DETENTION STANDARDS REQUIRE AT CVA, GSA & MVDF

- **Law library hours.** At least five hours a week for each person, regardless of housing. PBNDS 2011 § 6.3(V)(C), at 422-23.
- **Equipment.** "[A]n adequate number of computers and printers," inspected daily, and a secure way to save legal work. § 6.3(V)(D), at 423.
- **Up-to-date materials** "at all times," including State Department and Human Rights Watch country reports. § 6.3(V)(E) & App. 6.3.A, at 423-24, 430-31.
- **Copies.** Free legal copies, including of records relevant to a case; staff may not read legal documents. § 6.3(V)(H), at 425.
- **Language access** in using the law library. § 6.3(II)(11), (V)(I)(3), at 421-22, 426.
- **No denial as punishment.** Never "as a disciplinary measure, reprisal, retaliation or penalty." § 6.3(V)(O), at 428.
- **Mail timing.** Incoming mail within 24 hours; outgoing mail by the next business day. § 5.1(V)(D), at 359.
- **Legal mail.** Staff may not open or read outgoing legal mail, and any inspection requires the person's presence. § 5.1(V)(C)(5), (G), at 359-61.
- **News media.** People may correspond with the news media. § 5.1(V)(M), at 362-63.
- **Envelopes and postage.** Free standard-size envelopes; no limit on mail sent at one's own expense. § 5.1(V)(A), (J)(1), (K), at 358, 362.
- **Solitary confinement.** The same law library access as the general population. § 6.3(V)(K), at 426-27.
- **Legal material by mail.** People may receive any material reasonably necessary to present a legal claim. § 5.1(V)(H), at 361.
- **No retaliation for grievances.** Staff may not punish or retaliate against people who file grievances. § 6.2(V)(G), at 420.
- **Phones.** Free or direct calls to the immigration court, BIA, and federal courts; legal calls never denied, even in solitary confinement. § 5.6(V)(A)(2), (E), (H), at 386-90





DETENTION STANDARDS VIOLATIONS

CVA is violating these National Detention Standards: [19]

- § 6.3(V)(C): law library access limited to five people at a time during a single three-hour daily block for dorms of 80 or more.
- § 6.3(V)(D): no computers in the dorms and no way to save legal work.
- § 6.3(V)(E): no case law or legal research from April to August 2026, a legal database that is not regularly updated, and restricting legal research as discipline.
- § 6.3(V)(H): the librarian reading, restricting, and resisting copies, including of medical records.
- § 6.3(V)(I): providing no law library assistance in languages other than English.
- § 6.3(V)(O): taking away tablet access to punish a protest.
- § 6.3(V)(K), (N): failing to tell a person in solitary confinement that he could use the law library.
- § 5.1(V)(D): delivering incoming legal mail more than 48 hours after it arrived, and holding outgoing certified mail for three days.
- § 5.1(V)(H): trying to return legal mail from family on the ground that only lawyers can send legal mail.
- § 5.1(V)(A), (J)(1): commissary caps and stamp restrictions that keep people from mailing court filings.
- § 5.1(V)(K): charging for envelopes.
- § 6.2(V)(G): withholding free envelopes after people filed grievances.
- § 5.1(V)(M): depriving tablet access for corresponding with news media.
- § 5.6(V)(E), (H): charging for calls to courts and lawyers, and cutting off messaging.

[19] *PBNDS 2011, supra.*

GOLDEN STATE ANNEX (GSA)

GSA, in McFarland, is a 700-bed facility that GEO Group operates under the same ICE contract as CVA, and is also treated as an "annex" to MVDF. GEO Group's contract covering GSA, MVDF, and CVA is worth up to about $1.69 billion through 2034; ICE has committed about $77.6 million for GSA and MVDF for December 2025 through December 2026.[20] Like CVA, GSA falls under the PBNDS.[21]

Access to computers and legal materials

Limited law library. A detained person told us the law library is open every day, with a one-hour limit, four computers, and a copy machine. Each dorm also has two computers. The computers have the same legal database as MVDF and CCDF, and it is not regularly updated. The books include nonfiction, religious, fiction, education and college, and GED books.

A detained person told us the law library is open every day, with a one-hour limit.

Country conditions materials, which are essential evidence in asylum and other protection cases, are not available on the computers or tablets or in the library.

Missing materials. Forms became available to everyone only in mid-October 2026, after a detained person asked IT to add them; before that, only some older accounts had forms, and those were outdated. Country conditions materials, which are essential evidence in asylum and other protection cases, are not available on the computers or tablets or in the library.

Case status checks cut off. People cannot check their habeas case status. In July 2026, after people in one dorm collected signatures and complained, staff restored access, but then cut it again.

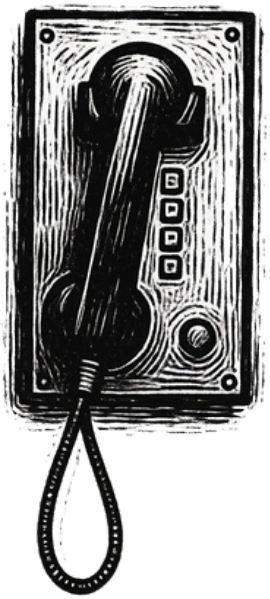
[20] *USASpending.gov, Award 70CDCR20D00000008, supra.*
[21] *AG Report at 56.*

Ability to timely mail out applications, evidence, and briefs

Expensive and inaccessible phones and tablets. Domestic calls cost 7 cents a minute; international rates vary by country, for example 75 cents a minute to Peru, 80 cents to Venezuela, and 95 cents to Cuba. People are required to pay for calls to the federal district courts, the Ninth Circuit, and state courts.

Tablet messaging costs money for every minute the app is open, including time spent drafting, and outside senders pay 25 cents per message sent. According to people we interviewed, a representative of the tablet and phone vendor said high costs are meant to limit use.

Limited access to postage. Stamps must be purchased through commissary, which, as at MVDF and CCDF, must be ordered days in advance and is distributed only weekly. Other than stamps, the only other option for sending mail is Priority Mail, which costs $12.99 for a regular envelope and $20 or $30 for small boxes; envelopes get a tracking number, but boxes do not.



People are required to pay for calls to the federal district courts, the Ninth Circuit, and state courts.

DETENTION STANDARDS VIOLATIONS

The PBNDS provisions summarized in the CVA section also govern GSA. GSA is violating these standards:

- § 6.3(V)(E) & App. 6.3.A: no country conditions materials, outdated or missing forms until mid-October 2026, and a legal database that is not regularly updated.
- § 5.6(V)(A)(2): phone and messaging rates that, by the vendor's own account, are set high to limit use rather than to reflect costs.
- § 5.6(V)(A)(2), (E), (H): charges for calls to federal and state courts.

MESA VERDE DETENTION FACILITY (MVDF)

MVDF is a 400-bed facility in Bakersfield that GEO Group operates. It opened in 2015 under an intergovernmental agreement with the City of McFarland, which became a direct contract with ICE in December 2019.[22] GEO Group's contract covering MVDF, GSA, and CVA is worth up to about $1.69 billion through 2034; ICE has committed about $77.6 million for MVDF and GSA for December 2025 through December 2026.[23] MVDF falls under the PBNDS.[24]

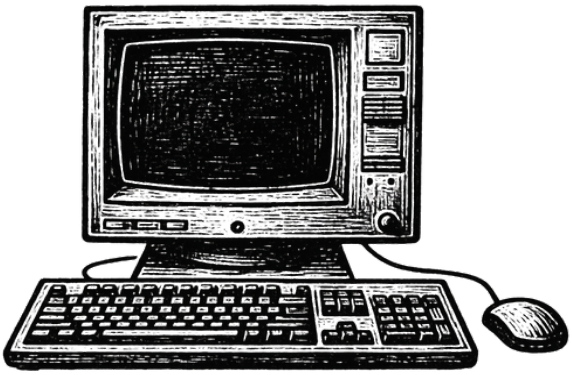
Access to computers and legal materials

Limited access to law library. Only 14 people from each 80-person dorm may use the library each day, for one hour. If the slot conflicts with lunch or yard, it is cut to 30 to 45 minutes.

About half of the library's ten computers work, and they do not have any forms, legal resources, or the legal database on them.

Restricted access to legal materials and out-of-date forms and information. Although each dorm of 80+ people has four computers, one person reported that at any given time one to three of the computers do not work. The dorm computers have a legal database that is infrequently updated: one person reported that during his year-long detention he had only seen it updated twice. The computers also have forms that are expired: people who filed them have had them returned. The word processing software is reportedly "decades old." There are about 20 tablets, about two for every 10 people, with the legal database, but people are limited to using the devices for two hours a day.

The computers also have forms that are expired: people who filed them have had them returned.



[22] *AG Report at 77.*
[23] *USASpending.gov, Award 70CDCR20D00000008, supra.*
[24] *AG Report at 77.*

Access to printing and copies

There is no printing in the dorm. People must ask the librarian, and documents are ready the next day or so.

Ability to timely mail out applications, evidence, and briefs

People pay to send and receive messages, and to make phone calls. The phones have the ability to call the BIA and the Ninth Circuit for free, but few people seem to know about them. Calls to the immigration court and federal district court cost money.

People share the tablets, and the two-hour daily limit also limits calls and messages.

The commissary sells stamps but orders them once a month, and they often run out. Although people can ask the mail room to send an item and charge the postage to their commissary account, the process takes two to three days: staff did not process a time-sensitive filing submitted on a Friday until Monday or later. The facility eliminated Priority Mail ($12 flat rate) around early October. Certified mail is available but tracking numbers are not provided, and there is no expedited option. Staff seal legal mail outside the sender's presence, and people must leave envelopes open so staff can add items such as medical records or filing fees, which staff will not hand to them directly.
Incoming and outgoing mail used to be processed the same day it arrived; it is now delayed 24 to 48 hours.

DETENTION STANDARDS VIOLATIONS

The PBNDS provisions summarized in the CVA section also govern MVDF. MVDF is violating these standards:

- § 6.3(V)(C): law library access for only 14 people a day from a dorm of 80, for up to an hour, cut short when it conflicts with meals or recreation.
- § 6.3(V)(D): only about half of the law library computers work, and one to three of each dorm's four computers are down at any given time.
- § 6.3(V)(E): expired forms and no current case law on the dorm computers, and no legal database on the law library computers.
- § 5.1(V)(D): outgoing mail requests taking two to three days to process, and incoming and outgoing mail delayed up to 48 hours.
- § 5.1(V)(G): staff sealing outgoing legal mail outside the sender's presence.
- § 5.6(V)(E): no free or direct line to the immigration or federal district court.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations draw on documented detention standards violations, and what people detained in Kern County told us they need.

Recommendations for the ICE ERO San Francisco Field Office, the DHS agency responsible for the detention facilities and their for-profit contractors:

Legal resources:

- Work with legal service providers to load pro se resources and materials onto tablets and computers. ICE has already done this through its "Tablet LOP initiative," which in fiscal year 2023 let people at 26 detention facilities message Legal Orientation Program providers and get their materials on facility tablets.[25]
- Ensure reasonable access to resources on computers, including by:
  - adding at least four computers to each pod at CCDF;
  - creating a law library at CCDF;
  - reducing the time people at CCDF are locked in their cells, including by reducing counts and ending lockdowns as collective punishment;
  - regularly updating forms, case law, and legal research software;
  - ensuring people a way to confidentially save their work;
  - ensuring each detained person can access the law library for at least five hours a week; and
  - ensuring detained people are not restricted from accessing legal resources on the tablet.
- Provide access to a variety of country conditions materials, including the State Department and Human Rights Watch reports.



[25] *U.S. Dep't of Homeland Sec., U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Access to Due Process: Fiscal Year 2023 Report to Congress 5-6, 9 & n.11 (Feb. 20, 2024), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2024-04/2024_0220_ice_access_to_due_process.pdf.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mail and postage:

- Provide free postage. Short of that, provide certified and expedited mail free of charge to people who are indigent.
- Make all forms of postage, including stamps or metered postage, available every day.
- Deliver incoming mail the day it arrives, and deliver outgoing mail to the postal service the day people hand it to staff.
- Provide Certified, Priority, and Express mail options at facilities that do not have them, and provide tracking numbers.
- Give every person proof of mailing, such as a dated, signed receipt or log entry they can show a court, and record accurate delivery dates on incoming mail rosters.
- Post fixed rates, and give advance notice of any changes.
- Provide envelopes of all sizes on a daily basis.
- Hold counselors and case managers accountable for following mail policy.

Phones, tablets, printing, and copies

- Provide free, unrestricted telephone and tablet access for gathering evidence and researching eligibility for relief.
- Ensure that there is at least one printer and copier in each dorm or pod (two where more than 80 people are detained in a single unit), and provide free, court-appropriate printing and copies without caps.
- Provide free, direct lines to the immigration court, the BIA, the federal courts, and state courts; to all attorneys, and to friends and family who are assisting in evidence gathering.
- Provide access to check the status of pending cases, including cases before the district and criminal courts.

Retaliation

- Stop retaliating against detained people by weaponizing legal access. Never take away tablet, phone, postage, or mailing materials access as punishment, and provide the same access in solitary confinement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for EOIR, the DOJ subagency that runs the immigration courts and the Board of Immigration Appeals

- Apply the "prison mailbox rule," which would treat mail from detained people as filed on the day mail is deposited or handed to detention staff.[26]
- Accept late filings from people in detention.
- Accept filings from detained and unrepresented people by email.

Recommendations for state and federal policymakers

- Detention is designed to keep people from pursuing the relief rightfully available to them. Act to abolish immigration detention. Short of that, prohibit for-profit detention operators.
- Use state and federal inspection authority to examine legal access at each Kern County facility, including the punitive conditions that impede it.

Detention is designed to keep people from pursuing the relief rightfully available to them. Act to abolish immigration detention.



[26] *See Barrientos v. Lynch, 829 F.3d 1064, 1066-67 (9th Cir. 2016) (applying the prison mailbox rule to a detained noncitizen's petition for review); Fed. R. App. P. 25(a)(2)(A)(iii) ("A paper not filed electronically by an inmate is timely if it is deposited in the institution's internal mail system on or before the last day for filing . . . .").*



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