

# DENVER POST

## **ICE transfers immigrants held in detention around the country to keep beds filled. Then it releases them, with no help getting home.**

By Libby Rainey | [lrainey@denverpost.com](mailto:lrainey@denverpost.com) | The Denver Post

PUBLISHED: September 17, 2017 at 12:01 am | UPDATED: September 17, 2017 at 5:24 pm

It was a Tuesday afternoon, and a summer storm had blown in. Cruz had never been outside the walls of the detention center, where he had been transferred and held for overstaying his U.S. visa. Now, released on bond, he had only a few days to get back to his home in Texas, near the Mexican border. Immigration agents had picked him up near his home after he failed to signal while making a turn.

With a court hearing on his immigration status in Texas less than a week away, he was more than 1,000 miles from home and had no clue how to make it back. He had asked detention center guards for a ride to the bus station or assistance buying a ticket, but they said they couldn't help him. Instead, someone handed him a business card for a safe house nearby. He soon walked out the doors and into the warm evening.

Cruz is one of thousands of immigrants and asylum seekers who are picked up in one part of the country and transferred to other parts of the far-flung network of more than 200 detention centers every year. The transfers often result in people being released on the streets of unfamiliar communities far from family, support and legal representation.



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

After dinner, receiving some warm clothes and a bus ticket from Casa de Paz, recently released detainee Juan Cruz, left, heads off to get a midnight bus to return home to Texas as founder Sarah Jackson, right, smiles on the porch of Casa De Paz on July 25, 2017 in Aurora.



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

Sarah Jackson, right, shows Juan Cruz the comfortable room, clothing and toiletries available to him at Casa De Paz on July 25, 2017 in Aurora. Casa de Paz is a halfway house, founded by Jackson, for people leaving the ICE Detention Center in Aurora. The Casa coordinates picking up detainees to give them a place to stay, a meal, access to computers and transportation when needed for as long as they need to get back to their families.



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

These are photos of the hundreds of immigrants helped by Casa de Paz in their new home on July 25, 2017 in Aurora. Casa de Paz is a halfway house for people leaving the ICE Detention Center in Aurora.

Each month, ICE shuffles thousands of detainees throughout the web of privately contracted centers, county jails and other facilities to keep beds filled. ICE has no obligation to return detainees to the areas where they were picked up.

These transfers prioritize finances over the well-being of people being moved, immigrants rights advocates say.

“The overarching and No. 1 basis of transfers would be efficiency,” said John Sandweg, who served as ICE acting director in 2013 and 2014. “Generally, the first priority for ICE is to deport as many people as possible as quickly as possible, and they’re going to use the facility that’s going to help them accomplish that goal. Typically, that’s corporate or federal.”

Transfers allow ICE to keep beds filled in detention centers around the country and consolidate detainees near immigration courts with faster dockets and transportation, he said. A congressional mandate requires ICE to maintain at least 34,000 detention beds a day.

ICE does not keep track of how many people are transferred each month or how often individuals are transferred, spokesman Carl Rusnok said in an email. When and where a detainee is released is based, in part, “on operational considerations and timing of the individual’s custody determination or timing of the posting of the bond,” he wrote.

Detainees are regularly released without much notice, advocates say. Detention facilities typically have phones that those inside can use, but once detainees are released, ICE doesn’t help them transition into the outside world.

“There’s a lot of shuffling of people that takes place to fill beds,” said Megan Hope, a social worker with the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network. “It’s very burdensome for somebody to get out in a community they’re not from.”

Between January 2011 and October 2014, ICE transferred detainees about 5,000 times a month on average, according to a Human Rights Watch analysis of ICE data. Sixty percent of these transfers between detention centers crossed state lines. Most transfers to Colorado came from Texas. Nearly 20 percent of the transfers sent detainees more than 1,000 miles from their previous location.

Between January and September 2014, more than 44,000 detainees experienced a transfer. These practices still are common.

Through Aug. 26, the daily population of detainees averaged 38,153, Rusnok said. In Colorado, ICE contracts with private company The GEO Group for the Aurora detention center, but the agency also holds people in multiple county jails, ICE spokeswoman Karissa Marcum said in an email. ICE pays GEO \$104.43 a day per detainee for the first 525 detainees and \$49.96 for each additional person housed.

A 2012 ICE policy mandated that immigration officers not transfer detainees with immediate family in the area, an attorney in the area, pending or ongoing deportation proceedings, or granted bond or a scheduled bond hearing, unless the transfer was “deemed necessary” by a field office director.

But Sandweg said the policy was “overwhelmed by operational need” from 2013 until March, largely due to an influx of people from Central America crossing the border.

Although the surge is down, Sandweg said he expects transfers to remote, private facilities will increase under the Trump administration. He said he doubts that the policy trying to minimize the impact of transfers will be followed under the new administration.

“You’re going to start (seeing) people from farther and farther away when you want to fill those beds,” he said.

#### Casa de Paz

Recently released detainee Juan Cruz gets his bags packed to go to the bus station at Casa De Paz on July 25, 2017 in Aurora.

Juan Cruz was one of those transferred away from his family despite ICE policy.

“When they told me they were going to send me somewhere, they didn’t tell me where I was going,” Cruz said of being sent to Aurora from Texas. Now, in an unfamiliar state, he wanted to get home — “the faster, the better.”

Once the rain subsided, he decided he would walk out into Aurora to find a gas station, or open store — or anywhere, really — and ask to use a phone to call his wife.

The detention center he would soon walk away from is looming and impersonal. A massive, rust-colored building with a bright-blue entrance and red detailing on its few windows, the center housed 576 people as of July 1. The facility is in an industrial part of Aurora, near Peoria Station, but many of the people on the trains passing nearby and cars zooming down thoroughfares in the area aren't aware it exists.

Hope, the social worker, said that several times a year, Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network sees dozens of people who were detained outside Colorado but are eligible for release in Aurora. In July, the network was seeing people from Utah released in Aurora, she said. Earlier in the year, it was people from California.

Those released have only the possessions they had when they were caught. Like Cruz, many have never been to Colorado before.

Sarah Jackson wanted to help detainees facing these challenges and their families when she founded Casa de Paz, a house that offers temporary refuge to those leaving detention and people visiting detainees. Casa de Paz has served more than 1,100 detainees and their family members since it opened in 2012.

“If they're released in December, they're given whatever it is they were caught in. So they could just have a T-shirt,” Jackson said. “The house rule is ‘Mi casa es tu casa,’ so people can take whatever they need from the house when they carry on to their next destination.”

Every weekday at 6 p.m., Casa de Paz volunteers drive to the detention center to pick up detainees released that day who need a place to go. Sometimes, guards call Jackson to alert her that people will be leaving detention. More than 250 volunteers help Jackson operate Casa de Paz.



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

Sarah Jackson, founder of Casa de Paz, right, gets help from volunteer Isabelle Houlbreque, left, as they look up a bus schedule for their recent arrival at their house on July 25, 2017 in Aurora.

Volunteer Isabelle Houlbreque picked up Cruz on the day of his release, driving him to the warmly lit Casa de Paz, which is just a short drive from the detention center. Photos and letters from the many people who have passed through the house hang on the walls, and in the kitchen, stickers mark locations on a map where visitors have come from — a constellation of dots across the continents.

Casa de Paz moved to a new location earlier this month — a house in Green Valley Ranch that Jackson chose for its space and proximity to the airport. She brought the notes and mementos with her.

One letter reads: “Muchas gracias. Sara es un Angel de Dios aqui en la tierra” (“Thank you very much. Sara is an Angel of God here on earth”).

Sometimes Casa de Paz is packed with people. Other times, it’s empty, awaiting the next wave of releases. On the night Cruz arrived, he was the only guest. Cruz was born in Mexico but has lived in the United States since he was a child. He said he came to America legally with his mother, but his visa has expired. Now 23, Cruz planned to ask the judge in Texas for a work permit to extend his stay in the country he calls home.

“I don’t have any family in Mexico,” Cruz said. “They’re all in the United States.”

That night, he caught a bus to Texas from the Denver Greyhound station. He would arrive home two days later.

Many transfers



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

Shoeb Babu, of Dhaka, Bangladesh, poses for a portrait in his apartment in Aurora. Babu, an immigrant, spent years in several ICE detention facilities in many different states before landing in Aurora.

Those released from detention in Aurora have often spent time in numerous facilities around the country before their release. Shoeb Babu, who fled Bangladesh in 2014, lived in detention for 2 1/2 years.

When he arrived in the U.S., he was taken first to Port Isabel, a detention facility in Texas, then to the El Paso County jail in Colorado Springs, and finally to Aurora. He stayed 18 months in Aurora, fighting his case in court and representing himself, but he was denied asylum after 13 court dates.

During this time, he developed friendships with Casa de Paz volunteers who would regularly meet him in the visitors room, and he gained the help of pro-bono lawyers. He participated in a hunger strike, demanding better treatment of those detained in Aurora. But then he was transferred again, to a facility in Arizona, then Louisiana, and finally to Etowah County Jail in Alabama, where he spent more than eight months.

“I wanted to give up,” Babu said. “Two years in jail for no crime.”

Maria Giordano, a Casa de Paz volunteer who had been visiting Babu for months, learned he had been transferred from Aurora when she showed up for their regular visiting hour and he was gone. She and other advocates called his lawyers, state politicians and GEO for months, asking that they send him back to Colorado.

In January, he was returned to Aurora, where the Board of Immigration Appeals granted him asylum. Officers handed Babu his belongings — collected when he first crossed the border — in a large plastic bag. He walked out of the detention center and into snow for the first time.

“Now I’m free,” he said. “(I walked) outside and saw the snow, threw the snow, and cried and cried.”

Hazrat Malook, who fled Pakistan in 2013, spent 18 months at the Adelanto Detention Center in Southern California before being transferred to Aurora. Malook came to the United States in 2014, where he presented himself as a refugee seeking asylum at the Mexican border.

After Malook was finally released in April 2016, he spent two nights at Casa de Paz.

“Casa de Paz is like a light,” Malook said. “If you’re inside the detention center and you don’t have anyone — when they release me, they don’t care. They say go!”

He felt lucky to have been released in Aurora, where Jackson and her small army of volunteers were on hand to help. In Adelanto, where he spent most of his detention, Malook said people who were released without someone to pick them up would have to walk more than 10 miles to the nearest bus stop. Either that, or they’d pay more than \$100 for a taxi all the way to Los Angeles.

There are only a handful of homes such as Casa de Paz around the country. About 150 miles south of Atlanta, El Refugio offers shelter to those visiting Stewart Detention Center in rural Georgia. But El Refugio executive director Amilcar Valencia said the resources of volunteer-based safe houses cannot provide all the support detainees need.

“Even if they are released, they can’t find housing or support from the government,” Valencia said.

This lack of support has made Babu’s first months out of detention in the U.S. a constant battle. Babu, affable and funny, is quick to tell a story about his childhood in Bangladesh or about a friend he met in detention. But he has spent most of his time as a free man in America on his own, missing home and feeling lonely.

“Now I’m released, but I don’t feel that much freedom,” Babu said. “I never thought that when you got out of detention, life would be this hard.”

Libby Rainey

Libby Rainey writes for the city desk at The Post. Reach her at 303-954-1499

<http://www.denverpost.com/2017/09/17/ice-detention-transfers-immigrants/>