



Immigrant Accompaniment

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I'm sitting in the packed Montgomery County Council Chambers as the Council debates the Trust Act which would prohibit our county police and sheriff's departments from holding people for ICE unless there is a judicial warrant (signed by a US District Judge). There are upwards of 30 witnesses, almost all testifying in favor of the act, but I am particularly struck by two of them.

The first is a 17-year-old young man, a high school senior. Both his parents are undocumented. He tells the Council that his father had tried to get his citizenship papers but could never figure out how to navigate the system. In mid-December his father was arrested in the parking lot of a Home Depot and taken into detention. Since then, he has become the "man of the house" and everything that his father used to do now falls on him. He worries that his mother might be detained too. "I'm 17. I should be focused on college, car payments, and hanging out with my friends. But I've been forced to grow up overnight."

The second is a local educator who is herself an immigrant. She says that many of her students' parents are undocumented and they are afraid to cross the border into DC to take their kids to Children's National Hospital. If a student with undocumented parents has a pre-op appointment or a procedure at Children's Hospital, a teacher or school social worker has to take the child instead of one of their parents. She reminds us that it isn't only undocumented immigrants who are being arrested and detained—ICE can potentially detain you on the basis of appearance, accent, or language you are speaking. She breaks into tears in the middle of her testimony.

"We say we want our kids to thrive. We want them to read at grade level and excel in math. In what world does that happen when children are grieving the disappearance of their parents? Protect our kids!"

I have participated in a number of demonstrations, particularly for Kilmar Abrego Garcia, the young father living in the next county over who was mistakenly deported to El Salvador despite a court order forbidding the government from doing so, and has been repeatedly targeted since then for deportation to various African countries and facing dubious criminal charges. At one of the demonstrations for Abrego Garcia, I am among the group of clergy holding a banner behind the speaker's podium. As a result, my face is splashed all over both print and broadcast media, and I get calls from people I haven't heard from in years: "I thought I saw you on CNN/NBC/Reuters/Fox News." My face still sometimes appears in news stories about the Abrego Garcia case.

I have also responded to a couple of requests for interfaith clergy to accompany folks who seemed at risk to their ICE check-ins. But now it seems I need to do more. I take training to accompany immigrants to their ICE appointments and immigration court.

Along with two other volunteers, I sit in the waiting room of an ISAP (Intensive Supervision Appearance Program) office. ISAP is an ICE-run “alternative to detention” which means that the person is tracked by a phone app or an ankle bracelet, has frequent check-ins and a curfew. We met Maria, our “compa” (the person we are accompanying), a few minutes before her appointment time. We don’t know much about her and we are not supposed to ask, but she does give us a form the accompaniment program provides which has her full name and other demographic information as well as the name and phone number of a friend or relative to call if she gets detained. The form also asks for the name and contact info for the compa’s lawyer but very few compas actually have them; immigration lawyers are both scarce and expensive. Maria also gives one of the other volunteers her purse when she is called back so it isn’t confiscated if she happens to be detained.

We don’t expect any issues because we’ve been told that only three of the 200 prior accompaniments from our organization have resulted in detainments. After we’ve waited ninety minutes for Maria to return, the receptionist calls us over and tells us that she has in fact been detained. We have a checklist of information that we’re supposed to request from the ISAP staff but we’ve also been told that they may not give it to us. The receptionist—who by her appearance and accent is also Latina—is actually very polite and does her best to be helpful, but most of the information we need, she simply doesn’t have. She does give us the name and contact info of the ICE agent who detained Maria and tells us that should be enough for her family to be able to track her down within a couple of hours, once she is processed at the ICE regional office in Baltimore. We take what information we are given and we go outside to call Maria’s family. We give her brother the information we have and make arrangements to get Maria’s purse back to him—fortunately he lives only a ten minute drive away. We also report on the detainment to our accompaniment network.

The three of us are quite shaken up even though we did not witness Maria’s arrest—the procedure at this office is to handcuff someone taken into custody and bring them out the back to a waiting van. We also realize that the stress and trauma we are experiencing doesn’t compare to what Maria and her family are going through. In a certain sense we feel that we have failed. We couldn’t keep Maria from being detained. But we did provide a service in notifying her family, because otherwise the family of someone detained can go several hours or days without confirmation of their detainment, and we did manage to get her purse back to her family.

I sit in a sparsely-furnished apartment, four miles and a world away from my home, with Luisa (not her real name), a young woman from Central America who has been in the United

States a few months; and Nancy, another immigrant accompaniment volunteer who happens to be a member of another Conservative synagogue in our area. We are waiting for an ICE home check-in appointment; it could be any time between 8 am and 6 pm, and it could be an in-person visit by an ICE agent or a phone call. Luisa tells me—and I translate for Nancy using my very rusty college Spanish—that she has Humanitarian Parole, which means she is sponsored by a charity such as HIAS, Catholic Charities, or Church World Service. This status allows her to stay in the United States for a limited time but she isn't eligible for any form of public assistance and she can't apply to have her status made permanent.

Luisa's husband was detained a month ago and is now being held in an ICE facility in Texas. Her two-year-old daughter is traumatized by the absence of her father. If Luisa should be detained today, we're to get in touch with Luisa's neighbor to take the daughter so that the toddler doesn't also wind up in detention. As it turns out, the check-in this morning consists of a two minute phone call and we are able to leave less than an hour after we arrived. Given my experience at my previous assignment—about which I have told Nancy but not Luisa—I'm very relieved.

Throughout the country there are immigrant accompaniment organizations and many rabbis and cantors and other clergy, as well as laypeople, participate. It's an important service that we can provide; despite Maria's experience, immigrants who are accompanied by well-dressed, middle class, educated and particularly White American citizens have better outcomes than those who are not accompanied. Friends and relatives of these immigrants do not want to go with them to their appointments and immigration court hearings, because it is risky for them to come into contact with ICE. But it's also a very anxious time and as clergy we are trained to be a "non-anxious presence" which is precisely what's needed.

Most of the organizations providing accompaniment are local and low-key, on purpose. They don't advertise or recruit and they don't maintain a web presence. But chances are you know someone who is already doing this and can connect you; I myself have referred several congregants and several colleagues for accompaniment training in the DC area.