

Letter Signed by Faith Organizations in Support of H.R. 5950 and S. 3005, the Detainee Basic Medical Care Act of 2008

June 3, 2008

Honorable Members of Congress
United States Senate
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Member of Congress,

We, the undersigned faith-based leaders and organizations, join to express our support for H.R. 5950, the Detainee Basic Medical Care Act of 2008, sponsored by Representative Lofgren (D-CA), and its Senate companion bill, S. 3005, sponsored by Senator Menendez (D-NJ). These bills would ensure meaningful, minimum standards of medical and mental health care for individuals held in immigration detention. These standards are necessary because the current medical standards of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), an agency of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), are not sufficient to protect people in their care. Moreover, current standards are not codified and thus are not enforceable.

Last month, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and *60 Minutes* published reports documenting grossly inadequate medical care and treatment provided to individuals in the federal immigration detention system. Drawing upon medical records, death reports, and other internal memoranda, these investigative reports revealed a system that is poorly managed and understaffed leading to consistently substandard care. The *Washington Post* reported that 83 deaths had occurred during the five year period from 2003 to 2008. These news reports are corroborated by a 2006 audit from the DHS Office of the Inspector General (OIG)¹ and a 2007 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO)² which found instances of non-compliance with ICE health care standards and that officials at detention facilities reported difficulties in obtaining approval for outside medical and mental health care for detainees.

The faith community is concerned about the government's increasing use of immigration detention and its harmful impact upon children, families and our communities. Many of our organizations regularly perform ministry, conduct vigils and provide legal and social services to immigrants in detention and recognize the need for these proposed reforms. Through our

¹ Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, *Treatment of Immigration Detainees Housed at Immigration and Customs Enforcement Facilities*, OIG-07-01 (December 2006), available at http://www.dhs.gov/xoig/assets/mgmt/rpts/OIG_07-01_Dec06.pdf.

² U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Alien Detention Standards: Telephone Access Problems Were Pervasive at Detention Facilities; Other Deficiencies Did Not Show a Pattern of Noncompliance*, GAO-07-875

ministry, members of our congregations, temples, and other places of worship have witnessed or received first-hand accounts of the hardship individuals endure while in immigration detention. Many have also heard from detainees that they are unable to obtain medical treatment in a timely manner and that when they do get attention the staff who provide medical care are unqualified or inadequately trained. These specific accounts are consistent with the in-depth reports referenced above. Taken together they provide powerful evidence that the system of medical care for individuals in immigration detention is fundamentally flawed and in need of immediate reform.

Our diverse faith backgrounds teach us that every human being must be treated with dignity and respect. We applaud Representative Lofgren and Senator Menendez for introducing this important measure to ensure that our country respects the basic human rights of everyone in the country, including vulnerable individuals in detention who must rely on the medical and mental health care the government provides them. We urge you to support H.R. 5950 and S. 3005 to restore decency and fair treatment in our immigration detention system.

Respectfully,

American Friends Service Committee

American Jewish Committee

Casa de Esperanza

Church World Service, Immigration and Refugee Program

The Episcopal Church

Friends Committee on National Legislation

Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

Hindu American Foundation

Hispanic Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Irish Apostolate USA

Jewish Council for Public Affairs

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference

Sikh Council on Religion and Education

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

Standing For Truth Foundation

Union for Reform Judaism

Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

World Relief