

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 30, 2025

The Honorable Kristi Noem
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE
Washington, DC 20528

Mr. Todd Lyons
Acting Director
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
500 12th St., SW
Washington, DC 20536

Dear Secretary Noem and Acting Director Lyons,

We write to express our concerns regarding Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Air Operations' (IAO) severe lack of transparency. IAO has been at the center of troubling actions ICE has taken under this administration but provides no public data on its operations. The only public data shared on its website is that "IAO stages a total of 12 aircraft at its operational locations in Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida" which has not been updated since August 8, 2023.¹

According to ICE's website, IAO is the agency's primary air transportation division, responsible for conducting the removal of noncitizens with final orders of removal to their countries of origin, as well as the transfer of detained noncitizens domestically to ICE-managed detention facilities. IAO also conducts "Special High Risk Charter flights" to deport noncitizens subject to final orders of removal to third countries. Notably, ICE does not own any planes—it uses contracted or chartered planes or purchases seats on commercial flights.

IAO has been centrally involved in facilitating several concerning immigration enforcement actions under the second Trump Administration. It transported Kilmar Abrego Garcia from Maryland to Louisiana to Texas, before illegally deporting him to El Salvador's infamous CECOT prison over a period of just three days.² The same day Kilmar was unlawfully deported, IAO took hundreds of immigrants to El Salvador without due process despite a judge's order that the planes not take off, or if they had taken off, to return to the United States.³ IAO also swiftly flew students being targeted by ICE for exercising their free speech rights, such as Rumeysa Ozturk, out of their local court's jurisdiction in what has appeared to be an attempt to remove them before their local judge can issue an order in their case.⁴ Additionally, ICE attempted to deport at least 76 unaccompanied minors to Guatemala in the middle of the night, requiring a judge to issue a temporary restraining order at approximately four a.m. preventing their deportation without due process.⁵ By the time the temporary restraining order was put in place,

¹ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "ICE Air Operations," August 8, 2023, <https://www.ice.gov/factsheets/ice-air-operations>.

² *Abrego Garcia v. Noem*, 777 F. Supp. 3d 501, 508-09 (D. Md. 2025).

³ Amended Class Action Petition for Writ of Habeas Corpus and Complaint at 15-16, *J.G.G. v. TRUMP*, No. 1:25-cv-00766 (D.D.C. Apr. 24, 2025), Dkt. No. 101.

⁴ *Ozturk v. Hyde*, No. 2:25-cv-00374, No. 42, at *4-5 (D. Mass. Apr. 4, 2025).

⁵ JURIST News, "US federal court orders halt to child deportations to Guatemala," September 1, 2025, <https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/09/us-federal-court-orders-halt-to-child-deportations-to-guatemala/>.

several of the children had already boarded planes.⁶ These cases paint a troubling picture of IAO attempting to shortcut due process rights and avoid or defy judicial authority.

IAO operates in near-total secrecy. ICE does not provide any publicly accessible data on its flights, destinations, costs to taxpayers, or passengers. Human Rights First's ICE Flight Monitor project, which uses publicly available aviation data to monitor IAO's flights, estimates that between January 20, 2025, and the end of August 2025, IAO has flown at least 7,454 total immigration enforcement flights to at least 66 different countries—a 34 percent increase over the same time period last year and the highest since tracking began in 2020.⁷ Public reporting notes that at least 180,000 people have been deported since January 20, 2025.⁸ The ICE Flight Monitor August 2025 report finds that flight volume is also trending upward, as the number of IAO flights has steadily increased throughout the year, with the months of May through August reaching higher figures than ever previously recorded.

In August 2025 alone, the ICE Flight Monitor tracked the highest monthly total of at least 1,393 U.S. immigration enforcement flights—averaging 45 flights a day. This tracks with reporting that earlier this year ICE modified its contract with CSI Aviation, its primary air charter company, to increase the number of flights and has been expanding its network of airline partners—including budget retail airline, Avelo, which appears to be the first retail airline to sign a long-term contract flying for ICE.^{9,10}

The Trump Administration has also been using U.S. military planes to carry out deportation flights, for which there is even less transparency, including logistical and financial coordination between ICE and the Department of Defense (DOD). Military flights can fly where no other planes can and provide less public information to protect operational security. The ICE Flight Monitor reports that the Trump Administration has used military planes to carry out at least 85 deportation flights since January 2025. They have primarily used C-17 and C-130 Air Force cargo planes, which are significantly more expensive than standard IAO charter flights, with the C-17 flights reportedly costing \$28,500 an hour.¹¹

Additionally, the conditions on board IAO flights have been described as “dehumanizing” and even “dangerous.”¹² According to the “ICE Air Operations Handbook,” dated February 2024, which was released as part of a Freedom of Information Act request, IAO requires that every

⁶ Associated Press, “A judge blocks the deportation of Guatemalan children already waiting on the tarmac to be sent back,” August 31, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-unaccompanied-children-trump-deportations-guatemala-3790909d69f19fd8cd8edffb6b3215c3>.

⁷ Human Rights First, “ICE Flight Monitor: August 2025 Report,” September 11, 2025, <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/ice-flight-monitor-august-2025-report/>.

⁸ The New York Times, “Deportations Reach New High After Summer Surge in Immigration Arrests,” August 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/08/21/us/trump-deportations-summer-data-immigration-arrests.html>.

⁹ Project on Government Oversight, “Meet the ICE Contractor Running Deportation Flights,” March 20, 2025, <https://www.pogo.org/investigations/meet-the-ice-contractor-running-deportation-flights>.

¹⁰ CBS News, “Budget carrier Avelo Airlines has an expansion plan — deport migrants for ICE,” April 25, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ice-deportation-flights-avelo-airlines/>.

¹¹ Reuters, “US military deportation flight likely cost more than first class,” January 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-military-deportation-flight-likely-cost-more-than-first-class-2025-01-30/>.

detainee “be fully restrained by the use of... handcuffs, waist chains, and leg irons” during their flight. Under “special circumstances,” IAO may restrain detainees with “spit masks, mittens, leg braces, cargo straps, the WRAP,” or other such restraint. The “WRAP” is a full-body restraint device used to completely immobilize a person, and its use by local law enforcement has reportedly contributed to at least a dozen deaths in the last decade.¹³ Multi-country flights have reportedly left some individuals shackled for as long as 50 hours.¹⁴

A recent lawsuit alleges that ICE put several detainees on a military cargo plane wearing straitjackets for 16 hours and did not tell them where they were going.¹⁵ Once the detainees landed outside of the U.S. they reported that U.S. officials told local officials of the third-party country to send the detainees to their countries of origin, circumventing court orders against deportation to those countries. Additionally, recent filings in another lawsuit allege that ICE officials beat detainees in an effort to forcibly remove them from one of the planes that landed in El Salvador back in March.^{16,17} Detainees have reportedly made hundreds of allegations of verbal, physical, and even sexual abuse by IAO personnel since 2010.¹⁸ In addition, numerous public accounts report medical emergencies and systemic limitations on access to critical care on board deportation flights.¹⁹ These reported conditions raise serious human rights concerns.

The Trump Administration reportedly intends to significantly increase the volume of deportations with the \$75 billion provided for ICE in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act over the next four years. DHS has also requested nearly \$11 billion for ICE in discretionary appropriations for fiscal year 2026.

Given the complete opacity of IAO, the troubling actions the division has taken under this Administration, and the impending escalation of activities as ICE implements its newly-inflated budget and requests ever-more resources from Congress, ICE must provide greater transparency. We request the following documents and information by November 12, 2025:

Costs of Operations

1. How much taxpayer money has been spent on IAO flights since January 20, 2025? Please provide the total cost.
 - a. What has been the total cost of each of these three categories: domestic flights, removal flights, and military flights since January 20, 2025?
 - b. Does DHS reimburse DOD for all costs when military flights are used?

¹² The Verge, “The brutal realities of ICE Air,” July 10, 2025, <https://www.theverge.com/planes/702479/ice-air-trump-mass-deportation-charter-airlines>.

¹³ Associated Press, “Takeaways from the AP investigation into ICE’s use of a full-body restraint device known as the WRAP,” October 22, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-deportations-trump-administration-civil-rights-takeaways-1dcc225e67c1dafba86b6ec4cc7da50e>.

¹⁴ ICE Flight Monitor post on X, <https://x.com/iceflightm/status/1963934394894213165?s=46>.

¹⁵ Complaint at page 2 and 6, *D.A. et al. v. Noem et al.*, 1:25-cv-03135 (D.D.C. Sept. 15, 2025).

¹⁶ *J.G.G. v. TRUMP*, 1:25-cv-00766, Pet’rs- Pls.’ Mot. For Prelim. Inj. Ex. C, at paragraph 7 (D.D.C. Oct. 15, 2025)

¹⁷ *J.G.G. v. TRUMP*, 1:25-cv-00766, Pet’rs- Pls.’ Mot. For Prelim. Inj. Ex. D, at paragraph 6 (D.D.C. Oct. 15, 2025)

¹⁸ The Verge, “The brutal realities of ICE Air,” July 10, 2025, <https://www.theverge.com/planes/702479/ice-air-trump-mass-deportation-charter-airlines>.

¹⁹ ProPublica, “Inside ICE Air: Flight Attendants on Deportation Planes Say Disaster Is ‘Only a Matter of Time,’” April 1, 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/inside-ice-air-deportation-flights>.

- c. What has been the total cost incurred by DHS and DOD, respectively, since January 20, 2025?

Treatment of Deportees

2. Are all of the processes, procedures, and rules in the IAO Handbook applicable and followed for deportations on military planes, including, but not limited to, medical support, meals, restraints, and hygiene accommodations?
 - a. If not, what are the variances?
3. What procedures does ICE have in place to document, track, and publicly report any serious medical events or fatalities involving noncitizens that may occur during in-transit domestic or removal flights?
4. When there are violations of the guidelines in the IAO Handbook, how are they reported and adjudicated?
5. The ICE Air Operations Handbook does not include any guidelines on procedures to prevent, detect, and respond to incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault during air transport. What written policies or procedures govern the prevention, monitoring, and response to allegations of sexual harassment and assault during IAO operations?
 - a. What reporting mechanisms exist for noncitizens to report allegations of sexual harassment and assault?
 - b. What measures are taken to ensure that detainees are screened prior to flight to identify those at risk of being victims or perpetrators of sexual abuse?
6. Based on flight tracking done by Human Rights First's ICE Flight Monitor and Tom Cartwright, it appears that there are more multi-stop routes now than in years prior. Is that a strategy change?
 - a. If so, what is the rationale for this change?
 - b. Are any extra accommodations made with respect to meals and restraints on the longer flights, which have been as long as 50-hour journeys? For example, is there a meal at least every 8 hours and are restraints removed at some times?
7. DHS's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties stated in its FY2023 annual report that "ICE does not have sufficient policies or operational guidance governing its use of the WRAP, contributing to concerns in the way it was used" and issued a recommendation that ICE develop "a policy governing use of the WRAP, documentation, and new expanded and specific training."
 - a. Has ICE fulfilled this recommendation?
 - b. Please provide the policy governing the use of the WRAP, the training requirements, and the training documents for DHS employees and contractors who may use it.
 - c. Which ICE employees and contractors are trained to use the WRAP? Are all ICE employees and contractors who have used or can use the WRAP trained to do so?
 - d. Is ICE tracking the WRAP's use as required by federal law when officers use force?
 - e. Please provide records documenting ICE's use of the WRAP.

Fleet and Operations

8. How many planes does IAO currently have in its chartered fleet, and how many more are available to IAO in its reserve fleet?

9. Do you plan to increase the size of the IAO charter and reserve fleets, and if so, by how much?
10. Which domestic airports are being used by ICE for these flights? Please provide a list of the airports and the number of domestic and removal flights, respectively, to and from each.
11. How is it determined if a deportation mission will use traditional IAO planes or military planes?
 - a. Which agency makes that decision?
12. Are Military Police, or any other DoD service members, providing security or other services on ICE Air commercial charter flights?
13. Do you anticipate a higher or lower percentage of future deportations will be carried out on military planes with anticipated volume changes and funding availability?
14. How do you make the determination to use commercial flights?
 - a. What percentage of people deported by air are via commercial flights?
 - b. What percent of these returns include escorts and what percent are not escorted returns?
 - c. Are people in restraints on escorted flights?

Carriers and Contracting

15. Please provide any requests for proposal and resulting executed contracts with any brokers or carriers, including CSI Aviation.
16. Are you actively in contract discussions with CSI or other carriers, even if exploratory, about augmenting contract carriers and planes for daily and high-risk flights?

Flight Data and Destinations

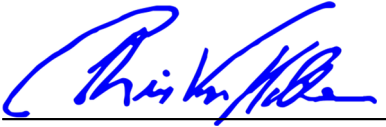
17. Please provide a list of destination countries, number of deportees, nationalities of deportees, and whether the flight was on a military plane or other IAO-chartered plane by domestic or removal flight since January 20, 2025.
 - a. For removal flights, please also list whether the flight was removing the deportees to their countries of origin or to a third country.
 - b. If the flight was to a third country, please list the percentage of the deportees who were considered security risks or other rationale for their being removed to a third country.
 - c. If the flight was to a third country, please clarify if that country was directed or authorized to deport the individuals to their countries of origin.

Voluntary Returns

18. If an individual in ICE custody agrees to voluntary removal, must the individual then await scheduling for a return flight arranged by ICE?
19. Are individuals in ICE custody, who have previously agreed to voluntary departure, permitted to arrange and pay for their own travel out of the U.S.?
20. ICE reportedly has a \$950 million contract with Salus Worldwide to effectuate voluntary returns.
 - a. What services will they provide?
 - b. Please detail the bidding process for this contract, including any deviations from prior bidding processes for flight contracts.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

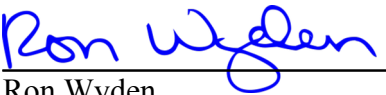
Sincerely,



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



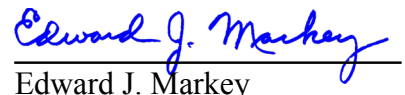
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



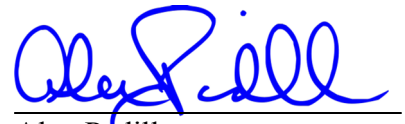
Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



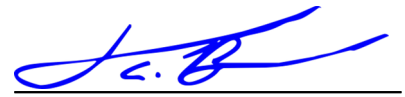
Adam B. Schiff
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator