

AN IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT PREPAREDNESS GUIDE FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

BJC90



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WHY THIS GUIDE?

The erosion of protections that formerly shielded houses of worship from immigration enforcement, along with heightened ICE activity across the nation, undermines religious freedom. **Pluralism and full participation in civic life are prerequisites to religious freedom**, and BJC is fighting back against degradations of sensitive location protections.

It is an unacceptable infringement on religious liberty when faith practitioners cannot attend church for fear of enforcement, are intimidated and dehumanized by the government, and are unable to access other essential resources, such as education and health care.

BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty) wants to help congregations counter these threats to religious liberty. This guide contains educational, training, and other resources to protect your congregations in the midst of heightened immigration enforcement threats.

IMPORTANT REMINDER

This guide is not legal guidance. We strongly encourage you to consult legal counsel, as local laws vary widely and each community's situation is unique.

LEARN MORE AT [BJCONLINE.ORG/IMMIGRATION](https://bjconline.org/immigration)

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SECTION 2

Guidance Surrounding

SENSITIVE LOCATIONS

THE MAYORKAS MEMO

Dating back as far as the Clinton Administration, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) had guidelines and protections in place to limit immigration enforcement in sensitive locations. This policy was strengthened in a 2021 memo, by then-DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, which dictated that officers “should not take an enforcement action in or near a location that would restrain people’s access to essential services or engagement in essential activities. ... We can accomplish our enforcement mission without denying or limiting individuals’ access to needed medical care, children access to their schools, the displaced access to food and shelter, people of faith access to their places of worship, and more.”

RESCINDING THE PROTECTIONS

Protections for such locations were rescinded in a DHS memorandum issued on January 20, 2025. This memo, titled “Enforcement Actions in or Near Protected Areas,” instated a new standard of “common sense” and “discretion” for individual officers to decide if enforcement at a sensitive location is necessary.

It revoked long-standing protections and standards limiting immigration enforcement at houses of worship and other sensitive locations.

In a DHS press release issued the day after the memorandum, a spokesperson shared additional comments: “Criminals will no longer be able to hide in America’s schools and churches to avoid arrest. The Trump Administration will not tie the hands of our brave law enforcement, and instead trusts them to use common sense.”



SECTION 3

Prepare Your

HOUSE OF WORSHIP

ASSESS AND PREPARE YOUR SPACE: DESIGNATE PRIVATE SPACES

Houses of worship are private property, and generally there must be a warrant or permission given in order for law enforcement to enter. However, certain spaces might be considered “open to the public” based on usage and signage. **Contact a lawyer for details on private versus public spaces and implications for your house of worship.** You can take practical steps to specifically designate parts of your space as “private” in order to make it less likely that officers will access those spaces without a warrant. To do so, place posters or signs in clearly visible locations designating certain rooms as “private,” and ensure that such spaces are not easily accessible to the public. Examples include youth and childcare spaces, classrooms, offices, and other places accessible only by invitation. Some experts advise moving social services fully inside, because lining up outside – e.g. for food distribution – makes participants less secure. But, a “private” sign in an easily accessible area likely provides little legal protection.

CREATE A COMMUNAL MAILBOX

Another tangible way to prepare your space to care for immigrants in the event of enforcement is to establish a communal mailbox. Some members of your community may not have a permanent address and need a reliable location for their physical mail concerning immigration proceedings to go. Keep it in a designated private location in your church and inform your congregation of the appropriate address to put down if they are in need of the mailbox.



KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

The effects of immigration enforcement can permeate all aspects of life outside your place of worship. **It is essential that your staff and congregation know their legal and constitutional rights.** Such rights may include the right to record law enforcement action, to remain silent, or to know when officers can or cannot access a private location via warrant. **One way to prepare your church is distributing bilingual “know your rights” cards.** These can be put in baskets near the entrance of your space, in newcomer packets, or be made available at request. More information can be found in Section 6.

Note: Federal criminal law prevents “harboring” undocumented individuals, but the scope of liability is unclear and varies across circuit courts. Contact legal counsel to protect your house of worship based on your specific circumstances.

CREATE AND TRAIN A RESPONSE TEAM

Your response team should include all individuals in positions of leadership in your organization, as they take forward-facing roles and may have to interact with officers should enforcement occur.

Designate a point person. Direct all legal questions to this individual, and direct enforcement officers to avoid others unwittingly answering probing questions. The point person should be trained in de-escalation, work closely with legal counsel, and be present at the house of worship for all major gatherings. Other members of the team may include worship leaders, clergy, childcare volunteers, and receptionists.

Train each team member on their role in the event of enforcement:

- **Childcare volunteers and youth leaders:** Be able to keep private spaces and classrooms secure. Know how to identify a legitimate judicial warrant (see pages 11-12). Record relevant information during enforcement, such as an officer's agency. Calmly coordinate with the point person on how to reunite children with their parents during or following enforcement.
- **Greeters or receptionists:** Know how to identify probing but seemingly innocent questions. Keep an eye out for enforcement officers or individuals who may be a risk to the congregation.
- **Worship leaders:** Prepare a few backup songs or a plan if enforcement occurs during a worship service. This will allow any other members of the enforcement response team to leave the stage and interact with enforcement officers as needed.

These are all just examples. Your team knows best how it is structured, as well as what training needs may arise.

Once your team is established and trained, work together to create an enforcement response plan. This team can also work with undocumented church members to create a contingency plan in the event of detention, covering medications, childcare, and other needs (see also Mutual Aid on page 20).

Note: Depending on your locality, enforcement officers may follow the law with varying degrees of accuracy. Additionally, each house of worship has unique situational needs and considerations while preparing for the event of enforcement. This is why seeking legal counsel should be a primary step in your preparedness efforts.

Enforcement may occur at any time, including during a service or event at your house of worship, although this is very rare. If it happens, here are some key actions you should take.

When interacting with officers, respond calmly and de-escalate as much as possible. If relevant, seek out de-escalation and conflict resolution training for your staff. Some resources for this are listed in Section 6. Keep officers and congregants as calm as possible. Ensure that members of your community are not encouraged to run, as that can establish probable cause for enforcement officers to conduct arrests.

Keep the childcare zone secure. Ensure all people who staff that area know what to do if enforcement attempts to enter or fails to produce a warrant. Have your point person trained in how to keep parents calm and reunite parents and children once enforcement activity lessens.

If your community livestreams your services, keep the recording going. Save it as evidence once enforcement action ends.

Train your staff to **document all aspects of enforcement** to the best of their ability. Documentation may include recordings, photos, information about warrants, officer information, what was said by whom, the timeframe, if people's rights were infringed upon, etc. It is important to note that if individuals document activities during enforcement, they should know their rights and stay out of the way from any enforcement action.

Your team should **meet after enforcement occurs** to write down relevant details and share information. Church leadership should then take this information and report it to legal counsel. Enforcement documentation can also be shared with local immigrant rights coalitions.

DECIPHER WARRANTS AND SUBPOENAS

Your enforcement team must be trained to identify whether officers have the ability to enter private locations in your house of worship. Officers can enter any space if given verbal consent, so it is important your team is trained to remain silent and answer questions carefully. If they have any doubts, they should refer to the point person. If verbal consent is not given, **the only valid legal document that allows entry to a private area is a judicial warrant.** Other warrants and subpoenas do not grant legal access.

If you are in a private location that officers are trying to enter, do not open the door. Alert your point person to what is occurring as soon as possible. Ask the officers to identify their agency (such as the Department of Homeland Security or Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and request to see credentials. Record all this information in a safe location. Ask to see a judicial warrant by sliding it under the door, then utilize your training to identify if it is legitimate.

For visual aids distinguishing these documents, refer to the resources in Section 6. **Again, if you or a member of your team receives any of these, consult legal counsel.** The only one you must comply with immediately is a *judicial warrant*, which is why it is crucial to know how to identify one.

On the next page, there are four boxes explaining some of the differences between judicial subpoenas, judicial warrants, administrative subpoenas, and administrative warrants.

JUDICIAL WARRANT

This is a formal written order that authorizes an officer to conduct an arrest, seizure, or search. It must be issued by a state or federal judicial court. It must be signed by a judge or a magistrate judge. Once identified as legitimate, compliance is required to avoid legal repercussions. This is not the same as a warrant signed by an immigration judge.

ADMINISTRATIVE WARRANT

From a federal agency such as the Department of Homeland Security, this authorizes an officer to make an arrest or seizure. This warrant may be signed by immigration judges or officers. It does not authorize a search like a judicial warrant does. If you are shown one of these by an officer, it does not mean they get access to a private location. However, they may make a seizure or arrest in a public area depending on the circumstances.

JUDICIAL SUBPOENA

This is a directive from a judicial court compelling testimony or production of evidence. Compliance is required, but not every member of an organization's team is authorized to accept a judicial subpoena. Refer to your point person and legal counsel.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUBPOENA

This is issued by a federal agency and signed by immigration officers or immigration judges. Immediate compliance is not legally required. It does, however, become compulsory to comply if the issuer of the subpoena takes steps to enforce the subpoena in federal district court.

SECTION 4

EDUCATION *and* PASTORAL CARE

CRAFT A MESSAGE

Once your house of worship has an action plan in place and your staff members are prepared, your congregation should be well-informed and grounded in the principles behind such preparations. Your leaders can craft a faith-rooted message as you prepare for immigration enforcement and strive to protect and treat your immigrant neighbors with dignity. **BJC suggests that in such a statement or address, you speak to the values of democracy, pluralism, religious freedom, and human dignity.**

While immigration can be a contentious and partisan topic, it is important that we, as faith communities, love our neighbors and emphasize that current enforcement standards are putting both families and individuals in crisis.

The current threats to sensitive locations jeopardize the ability of all individuals to fully participate in civic life and access their religious liberty, and faith leaders are in a unique position to step in and help.

Convey the Values of:
Religious Freedom, Democracy, Pluralism,
and Human Dignity

PASTORAL CARE CATEGORIES

The topic of immigration enforcement is intertwined with the need for pastoral care. All members of your community are being affected on differing scales. From newcomers with firsthand immigration experience to existing members of your community seeing violence and degradation of human dignity in the news, faith leaders must keep your community grounded in core values. **Human dignity, religious liberty, democracy, and pluralism should remain at the heart of a faith-based understanding of immigration enforcement.** Reiterating to your community the importance of those values will help newcomers feel cared for and supported, keep advocates on the right track, and act as a reminder for why this issue matters.

CARE FOR NEWCOMERS

The first category of pastoral care you should be prepared to engage in is for newcomers and immigrants in your community. As leaders, it is helpful to be aware of the trauma of migrants who traveled to the U.S. – what they experienced already and what they may continue to experience. Leaving home to travel to a new country often involves losing a sense of belonging. And, amid heightened ICE enforcement, many newcomers continue to feel unsafe once they arrive. **Trauma compounds itself in isolation**, which is why faith leaders have an opportunity to create community and treat immigrants with dignity. Immigrants arrive to the U.S. seeking human dignity, and faith communities can rise to the occasion.

Some methods of instilling a sense of belonging for immigrants are engaging in mutual aid, court accompaniment, and community-building work that addresses a sense of isolation.

Further details on these forms of advocacy are in the next section. On a day-to-day basis, creating a support network can be as simple as welcoming newcomers during services, inviting younger children to youth groups or fun events, and having bilingual staff members available if needed. Furthermore, many immigrant newcomers can benefit from spaces to speak with faith leaders about their fears and concerns.

Creating such open spaces is essential. During heavy conversations, provide reassurance but do not minimize their trauma. If you think a newcomer can benefit from tangible help, point them to advocacy or other resources. And finally, continue reaching out to check in. **As enforcement crackdowns continue, these communities are in need of ongoing support.**

CARE FOR ADVOCATES AND LONG-STANDING COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Existing members of your church, U.S. citizens, and those who choose to engage in advocacy may be experiencing a sense of powerlessness or hopelessness as a result of heavy news headlines or witnessing direct enforcement in their communities. To address stress and anxiety caused by the looming presence of enforcement, help people regain a sense of agency by getting involved in advocacy.

If advocacy is too big of a step, focus on discussions about guiding values and education on immigration enforcement. Education and collective action can do quite a bit of legwork to address this sphere.

If members of your community choose to engage in advocacy, faith leaders should guide them in doing it for the right reasons. It can be tempting to engage in advocacy to be perceived as heroic or to be seen doing good.

This is harmful because it decenters the immigrants who should be the focus of the advocacy. **To reorient advocates, continuously reiterate the guiding faith values behind their work: human dignity, religious freedom, pluralism, and democracy.**

The ongoing nature of immigration crackdowns may lead to advocates and caregivers burning out. There are a few strategies in pastoral care to address this.

Create a support network for advocates within your community.

Have people vocalize their experiences rather than holding in their emotions. Create small groups or other spaces for people to process what they have seen and done. If possible, create a system that allows people to periodically take a step back and rest. **For advocacy and immigrant care to be sustainable, it must also be grounded in the knowledge that caregivers can't pour from an empty cup.**



SECTION 5

Engage in

COLLECTIVE ACTION

THE PROTECTING SENSITIVE LOCATIONS ACT

BJC advocates for the protection of faith communities from immigration enforcement through our support of the **Protecting Sensitive Locations Act (PSLA)**. This proposed legislation seeks to permanently enshrine the Mayorkas Memo protections in law. It would protect sensitive locations, including houses of worship, from unfettered enforcement at or within 1000 feet of proximity.

Other protected locations include health care facilities, schools, playgrounds and childcare facilities, government buildings, and more. It would also require annual training for DHS officers about protecting sensitive locations, and it would require rendering void any removal proceedings which violated the enshrined protections.

[Click here to learn more](#) about the PSLA from the Center for Law and Social Policy. You can ask your members of Congress to support the Act, hold ICE accountable, and protect religious freedom by utilizing [this form](#) from BJC.



MUTUAL AID

One impactful way your community can respond to the needs of the moment is by participating in mutual aid efforts. Families with individuals either threatened by or detained by officers are put into crisis in financial, emotional, and spiritual ways. **Faith communities are in unique positions to create mutual aid networks to meet these immediate needs.** They can raise support for specific individuals or families as needed, and in the process meet immediate tangible needs. Community members can be the point person for specific families, providing groceries, caring for children, and aiding in other ways. If there are not members of your faith community who are in need of help but you still want to get involved, you can contact local immigrant support services. These organizations are overwhelmed amid heightened enforcement, and they may welcome help.

FAITH ORGANIZING AND FREEDOM VIGILS

If your community wants to draw attention to immigrant rights, planning or attending freedom vigils is an option. **Communities, not just those of faith, can engage in peaceful organizing** by protesting and walking around either detention facilities or other areas of importance for immigration and religious freedom. If your community engages in freedom vigils, it is ideal for them to happen with regularity. This helps bring increased attention to the issue. Possible activities at the vigils may include singing and making signs. Get creative! **For a deeper religious freedom impact, clergy can show up in their collars, stoles, and other religious vestments. This sends a visible message that faith leaders are engaging with their moral obligation to protect the dignity of immigrant neighbors.** And, faith leaders engaging in such vigils is a great opportunity to let your faith witness call attention to dehumanization and religious liberty infringements.

VISIT DETENTION CENTERS AND DETAINEES

An extension of faith leaders being involved in freedom vigils is the mobilization of leaders to request meetings with detainees. If such requests are denied, there arises an opportunity to publicize religious freedom violations. **All detainees should be able to meet with faith leaders and practice their respective faiths.** It is also relevant to note that members of Congress have the right to visit and inspect such detention centers. Faith communities can engage in outreach and encourage your representatives to join freedom vigils and request to tour detention centers as part of your advocacy.

COURT ACCOMPANIMENT

Another important aspect of immigration advocacy is court accompaniment. It can provide both a source of well-informed support for those undergoing immigration proceedings and a chance for advocacy for community members seeking to stay involved. **Court accompaniment done by faith leaders promotes the rights and dignity of immigrants in spaces that are often degrading, confusing, and scary.** By offering company in such contexts, not only do enforcement officers and power structures have to acknowledge they are being watched, but also immigrants are provided emotional, physical, and spiritual solidarity. Training to be an accompanier often involves legal education and volunteer hours. To get involved, look for immigration advocacy groups in your area for training. Further resources and explainers on accompaniment can be found in Section 6.

SUBMIT PUBLIC COMMENTS

If your faith community wants to take action against unjust federal regulations and executive orders, consider mobilizing them to submit public comments on proposed federal regulations. Doing so helps make faith voices heard past the walls of a physical house of worship. **Immigrants are being attacked across various areas of civic life, not just in regards to religious freedom.** You can also follow immigrant justice organizations that engage in national work to see their suggestions for methods to engage in advocacy. BJC also suggests placing particular emphasis on faith leaders getting involved and being vocal. Visible examples of faith leaders advocating for immigrant rights are deeply impactful, such as the images of faith leaders peacefully protesting in Minnesota during the ICE crackdown.

If you are unsure on how to find where to submit public comments or how to do so, you can [subscribe](#) to BJC's national email list. We share opportunities to submit comments and engage in advocacy.



SECTION 6

Check Out

RESOURCES & TRAININGS

Underlined words are clickable hyperlinks. If you are reading a printed version, visit BJCOnline.org/immigration for a PDF with active links.

RESOURCES FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

[Being a Good Neighbor to Immigrant Families](#) — from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a BJC member body

[Roadmap for clergy](#) on preparing congregations for immigration enforcement and advocacy — from the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

[Fact sheet](#) on immigration enforcement for houses of worship — from the ACLU

[Manual for faith leaders](#) on immigration enforcement, including guidance on private vs. public locations — from the National Latino Evangelical Coalition

[Guidebook](#) on educating your congregation on immigration enforcement — from the Southeastern Iowa Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

[Guide for houses of worship](#) on addressing the presence of federal agents — from Democracy Security Project

TRAININGS AND SUPPORT

[List of immigration enforcement trainings](#) — from the National Immigration Project

[Request a training](#) for your community — from the Civil Liberties Defense Center

[List of trainings](#) — from States at the Core

UNDERSTANDING LEGAL RIGHTS

[Webinar on knowing your rights](#) — from ACLU, Democracy Forward, and Georgetown Law School’s Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection

[Bilingual cards](#) — from the National Latino Evangelical Coalition

[Slide Decks and Explainers](#) — from the ACLU

[Request “Red Cards”](#) with lists of rights in various languages — from the Immigrant Legal Resource Center

[Website page](#) explaining the differences between administrative and judicial warrants — from the ACLU of Northern California

FINDING LEGAL SERVICES

[Website page with legal providers](#), organized by state, county, or detention facility — from Immigration Advocates Network. For questions, contact directory@immigrationadvocates.org

[Online directory](#) of local advocacy organizations —from ICE Rapid Response

COURT ACCOMPANIMENT

[Explainer about court accompaniment](#) — from Justice Power

[Training and resources](#) to become an accredited court accompanier — from the New York Immigration Coalition

[Website](#) for Jesuit Refugee Service’s court observation project

[Resources for unaccompanied children and their sponsors](#) — from ImportaMí

SENSITIVE LOCATIONS

[Analysis](#) of immigration and religious freedom – from The Law, Rights & Religion Project at Union Theological Seminary

[Litigation tracker](#) – from The Law, Rights & Religion Project at Union Theological Seminary and Religion News Service

[Fact sheet](#) on advocating for the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act – from the Center for Law and Social Policy

[Fact sheet on protected areas](#) – from the National Immigration Law Center

PASTORAL CARE

[List of pastoral care activities](#) – from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops

[Interview](#) on ways faith leaders can engage in trauma-informed pastoral care – from Young Clergy Women International

[Training](#) in trauma-informed pastoral care – from the North Carolina Council of Churches

[Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals](#) – a book for faith leaders on integrating storytelling into communal rituals

PROVIDING ‘SANCTUARY’

[Webinar on legal considerations](#) for sanctuary – from Insurance Board Partners in Protection

[Guidelines for sanctuary congregations](#) – from the Interfaith Center of New York