FLORENCE IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE RIGHTS PROJECT

Medical Neglect, Strip Searches, and Abuse: Deadly and Dehumanizing Conditions in the Eloy Detention Center

(June 2024-November 2025)

The Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project (The Florence Project) is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization that provides free legal and social services to the thousands of adults and children detained in immigration custody in Arizona. The Florence Project was founded in 1989 to provide free legal services to asylum seekers and other migrants in a remote immigration center in Florence, Arizona where there was no meaningful access to counsel.

From June 2024 through November 2025, the Florence Project talked to at least 60 people inside the Eloy Detention Center who reported complaints and other safety issues. Conditions including medical neglect, broken air conditioning in the summer, abuse by guards, and strip searches have become so unbearable that many people report that they prefer to risk their lives and ask for deportation to dangerous situations in their countries of origin to escape from the detention center. Several people have indicated to the Florence Project that they are afraid of dying inside of Eloy due to the conditions.

For the past several years, the Florence Project has filed hundreds of complaints with the oversight agencies, the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and the Office of the Immigration Detention Ombudsman.[1] In March 2025, the majority of the employees in both oversight agencies were cut, drastically reducing the agencies' ability to provide oversight. Due to the confusion and chaos surrounding whether the oversight agencies would continue to receive complaints, the Florence Project has filed significantly fewer complaints with those agencies. However, the Florence Project continues to document and share the complaints and abuses that are reported or witnessed.

Conditions that have been reported to and noted by the Florence Project include:

- **Medical Care Issues**
    - The death of Mr. Serawit Dejene on January 29 due to multiple infections including tuberculosis combined with HIV and possibly AIDS. Neither condition was included in the public-facing detainee death report.
    - No or infrequent outside optometrist appointments for eye care and prescription glasses;
    - Wait times of six or more months for dental care;
    - No root canals offered for dental care, only extraction
        - Multiple individuals reported that they are only offered tooth extractions instead of root canals that could save their tooth.
    - Lapses in necessary medication;

[1] *See* Florence Project's 6-month reports available at Arizona Adult Immigration Detention Center Complaints: March 2024 - August 2024 | Florence Project and Arizona Adult Immigration Detention Center Complaints: September 2023 - February 2024 | Florence Project

        - One woman reported she was not given lithium for about a week for her mental illness due to "a glitch in the system."
        - One man with a heart aneurysm was not given his blood pressure medication for about four days upon his arrival at Eloy.
    - Lack of appropriate care/diet for people with chronic medical conditions;
        - Multiple people with illnesses like diabetes and heart conditions reported that there is no appropriate diet for health, such as low fat or low sodium diets.
    - Delays or denials of necessary disability accommodations;
        - One woman with diabetes requested orthopedic shoes for several months. After she was taken to a podiatrist who recommended accommodation of this nature, the medical records reflect that Eloy medical staff made a request for the shoes. However, she reportedly never received the shoes and said that medical staff informed her that the shoes were expensive, and ICE would not pay for them.
    - Long waits for necessary specialty care; and
        - One man, who is a survivor of torture, reported feelings of electric shocks down his head and side and worsening eyesight on that side. Despite being told he would see an outside doctor, he has not seen one in the nine months he's been detained.
        - A man with bladder issues who experienced frequent urination requested specialty care but received no answer.
        - A man with a previous diagnosis of Hodges Lymphoma reported experiencing bleeding from his nose and throat but was only given a blood test and no outside follow-ups with a specialist.
    - Individuals handcuffed post-surgery and during hospitals stays.
        - One man who was in the hospital for approximately 10 days and received two heart surgeries, reported he was handcuffed to the bed through the entire hospital stay. He was also denied the ability to communicate with his family or counsel during his time at the hospital.
- **Mental Health Care Issues**
    - Use of pepper spray during self-harm incidents;
        - One woman who ingested soap and attempted to tie a bedsheet around her neck was immediately pepper sprayed as the first response to her apparent attempt at self-harm.
    - Individuals with serious mental illnesses unable to see a psychiatrist or psychologist;
        - One woman with severe psychiatric symptoms and weight loss of over 30 pounds did not see a psychiatrist or psychologist for over nine months

        - One woman with a history of depression, abuse, and hallucinations did not see a psychiatrist or psychologist for over three months
        - One man with hallucinations and a prior history of suicide attempts and a brain injury never saw a psychiatric or psychologist during his entire time at Eloy, over seven months
    - Weeks to months in segregated housing for people with serious mental illnesses; and
        - One woman with Major Depressive Disorder was kept segregated on different mental health "watches" for 20 days
        - The same woman who did not see a psychiatrist or psychologist for over nine months was also kept in segregation during the majority of those months, with no appropriate mental health treatment
    - Inhumane conditions of suicide watch
        - Individuals forced to sleep on a hard bed with no mattress for days;
            - The medical records of a woman who was on suicide watch for at least three days noted, "...states she is uncomfortable due to no mattress, pillows, and the bed is hard[2]
            - Another woman on suicide watch for about 3 days reported only being allowed to wear a green suicide smock but she used it for bedding, leaving her naked in her cell.
        - No access to recreation, showers, or phone and forced to eat finger foods with no silverware
            - The medical records of a woman who was on suicide watch for four days note, "She states she wants to eat regular food and take a shower. 'I smelled bad.'"[3]
- **Legal Access**
    - Inconsistent access to the law library due to staffing shortages;
    - Outdated or non-functioning computers unable to open legal programs;
    - Issues with printers and copiers that affect the ability to make copies for immigration hearings
    - Inconsistent access to telephone calls due to lockdowns and staffing shortages; and
    - Only very limited legal resources available in languages other than English.
- **Environmental Conditions**
    - Air conditioning not working in the summer when highs often reach over 110 degrees;

[2] Eloy Medical Records on file with authors.
[3] Eloy Medical Records on file with authors.

        - Two women noted using wet underclothes or washcloths to stay cool in their cells.[4]
    - Long lockdowns due to staffing shortages;
    - Inconsistent access to commissary;
    - Dirty rags used to clean the kitchen;
    - Unsanitary conditions in showers and bathrooms; and
    - Mold growing on walls.
- **Abuse and harassment by guards and ICE**
    - Disciplinary write-ups for minor incidents;
        - One reported receiving a disciplinary write-up for making a sleep mask.
        - Another woman reported receiving a disciplinary write-up for having extra articles of clothing.
    - Physical abuse;
        - One man reported having his ribs injured and a spit hood placed over his head when he was forcibly removed to a third country.
    - Verbal abuse; and
        - One woman reported that when she told a guard it was too hot to be in the sun for recreation during the summer the guard told her it was punishment for being immigrants.
        - Guards made derogatory remarks, like calling people "filthy" and "like animals."
        - Guards told people that they don't have rights as immigrants.
        - Homophobic comments by guards to LGBTQ+ individuals.
    - Excessive strip searches and pat downs.
        - Several people confirmed that there are full-body strip searches before and after every family visit.
        - Several people reported multiple daily pat downs whenever they leave or return to their housing unit.

This report, which includes examples from 2024 and 2025, highlights some of the stories and conditions in Eloy, but, as anywhere from 1200-1500 people at a time have been detained in Eloy in recent months, many more stories and abuses never come to light.

[4] *See* Ajasa, Amudalat; Wolfe, Daniel, "ICE detainees face greater risk from extreme heat than most prisoners," *The Washington Post,"* October 19, 2025; *available at* Column | Dangerously hot ICE detention centers are putting detainees at risk - Washington Post

Death of Mr. Serawit Dejene

Mr. Serawit Dejene was a 45-year-old man from Ethiopia who was detained at the Eloy Detention Center on August 21, 2024.[5] He received medical attention from facility staff for back pain after his arrival. Despite an abnormal pulse, he received no follow up until mid to late December 2024 when he reported extreme fatigue and dizziness. Medical personnel noted "an elevated pulse and temperature, and a 20% weight loss." It is unclear why such a drastic weight loss was not noticed previously. He was then transported to an emergency room where he was diagnosed with suspected lymphoma. By December 23, Mr. Dejene was again transported to the emergency room.

Between January 1 and January 3, 2025, Mr. Dejene was diagnosed by hospital staff with acute respiratory distress, pneumonia, possible lymphoma with metastases in the lungs, sepsis, supraventricular tachycardia, ischemic stroke, and tuberculosis. Mr. Dejene was placed on a ventilator on January 3 and passed away on January 29.

The Maricopa County Office of the Medical Examiner, which performed his autopsy, listed his cause of death as "complications of multiple infections in the setting of human immunodeficiency virus."[6] The report notes that by December 23, when he was transported to the emergency room for the second time, he already had sepsis. During the admission to the hospital on December 23 he was noted to have "multiple infections including human immunodeficiency virus, likely acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, central nervous system toxoplasmosis, tuberculosis, Diphyllobothrium tapeworm, pneumocystis pneumonia, Klebsiella pneumoniae, Candida albicans, and Cytomegalovirus (CMV).

It is unclear why medical staff at Eloy did not know that Mr. Dejene was living with HIV or why they did not perform any tests, that we know of, despite his multiple reports of pain and other symptoms, that would have uncovered any of the multitude of infections that he was living with by the time of his death or his immunocompromised status prior to his being moved to intensive care after an ER visit. It is possible that, in the four months that Mr. Dejene was in Eloy, medical staff never screened him for HIV or any other of the infections that eventually killed him.

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[5]Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detainee Death Report: Serawit Gezahegn Dejene," *available at* ddr-SerawitGezahegnDejene.pdf

[6] Maricopa County Office of the Medical Examiner Report on file with authors.

Medical Care and Disabilities

This year, at least 25 people have died while in ICE custody, making it one of the deadliest years on record.[7] Clients report that they face extensive barriers when attempting to obtain care for medical conditions, chronic illnesses, and disabilities, often putting them in life-threatening situations.

The Florence Project worked extensively Ivan*[8] with a 34-year-old legally blind man with Marfan Syndrome, an aortic aneurysm, and bradycardia in Eloy. Ivan was detained during an ICE check-in in April 2024. Ivan was initially sent to the Otay Mesa Detention Center in California. Despite his life-threatening medical conditions and preparation for surgery to repair the heart aneurysm in California, he was transferred to Eloy in September 2024. When he arrived at Eloy he was not provided with his blood pressure medication for about four days, was not seen by a provider for about two weeks after his arrival, did not see another cardiologist until over a month after his arrival, and did not see a cardiothoracic surgeon until about two months after his arrival.

In November 2024, seven months after his original detention, it was discovered that Ivan's aortic aneurysm had grown significantly, to a dangerous size that put his life at risk. He did not receive surgery to repair the aortic aneurysm until more than three months later February 2025. Outside medical professionals who reviewed Ivan's medical records noted that due to the size of his aortic aneurysm, it could have burst at any time, with a 100 percent mortality rate. ICE was aware that he needed life-saving surgery for months, yet his surgery was inexplicably delayed. He eventually received two open heart surgeries, including the installation of a pacemaker. During his 10-day stay at the hospital, he was handcuffed to the bed the entire time and experienced significant distress. In the Florence Project's many visits with him in Eloy, he was consistently worried that he would die in detention before, during, or after surgery. Since his surgery, he has lost a significant amount of weight because there is no heart-healthy diet available at Eloy and he is afraid that the standard diet will cause him further heart problems.

A woman with whom the Florence Project worked with was detained in Eloy and living with lupus, diabetes, and hypertension, and was previously treated for Hodgkin Lymphoma. She reported that she did not have a healthy diet for her diabetes or hypertension, and the only change to her diet was that she did not receive dessert on her tray. While in Eloy, her health deteriorated and she developed painful lesions from lupus all over her body. She was forced to use a wheelchair due to the increased pain in her legs. Despite this, she did not see a lupus specialist for at least two months after her detention. She reported that during an outside endocrinologist

[7] 2025 is the deadliest year to be in ICE custody in decades : NPR
[8] Pseudonyms used throughout the rest of the report to protect confidentiality and privacy

appointment, two Eloy guards stayed in the room with her, making her extremely uncomfortable when she had to lift her shirt to show the doctor the lesions.

Another woman in Eloy with diabetes and consistent leg pain never received her orthopedic shoes. Medical records from Eloy note that she went to a podiatry appointment on July 7, 2025 where the provider noted the need for "diabetic shoes" and medical staff made a referral for the shoes.[9] However, she never received the shoes and she reported that medical staff told her that the shoes were expensive and that ICE would not pay for them.

Mental Health Care and Segregation

Three individuals with serious mental health disabilities were detained in Eloy for months without being able to see a psychologist or psychiatrist. The Florence Project consulted with outside doctors who reviewed these patients' medical and mental health records. Providers who reviewed the records opined that the treatment these individuals received amounted to medical mismanagement and potential medical neglect. Specifically, they noted that these cases demonstrated a pattern of "absence of qualified psychiatric oversight," "inappropriate use of psychiatric medications," "use of isolation instead of treatment," "lack of informed consent and capacity evaluation," and "medical neglect of serious conditions."[10]

One woman, whose records were reviewed, was placed in segregation and on suicide watch for most days of nine-month period. She experienced severe mental health symptoms. During the nine months she lost over 30 pounds and never spoke to a psychologist or psychiatrist. She was diagnosed only with ineffective coping and oppositional defiant disorder. Over nine months after her arrival at Eloy, she was finally transferred to a psychiatric hospital where she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and started on antipsychotic medication. The doctor who reviewed her medical records noted,

> "This admission brings up several concerns about her psychiatric condition. First, she has Bipolar I confirmed by a psychiatrist. This condition has not been treated appropriately while in detention (with medications and psychotherapy) as evidence *[sic]* by the fact that she was acutely decompensated requiring involuntary admission to a psychiatric unit in the setting of severe, acute mania. Second, this condition requires close treatment by a psychiatrist and medications. She has not been seen by a psychiatrist or given medications for Bipolar Disorder while at Eloy."[11]

[9] Eloy Medical Records on file with authors.
[10] Letter on file with authors.
[11] Letter on file with authors.

Another woman, Diane, whose records were reviewed by an outside provider, did not see a psychologist or psychiatrist for over three months in Eloy, despite endorsing serous mental health symptoms. Upon her arrival at Eloy, Diane reported to medical staff a history of abuse, depression, and hallucinations and requested to see a psychiatrist. Nine days after her arrival at Eloy a guard at the facility noted "Detainee and others in the pod said she needs to see psych." Detainee is sharing stories about history to me and others and crying and getting angry."[12] Despite this, she still did not see a qualified mental health professional for a full psychiatric assessment for over three months.

At the time the outside providers reviewed Diane's records, they noted "[Diane] has demonstrated complex psychiatric needs that have not been appropriately evaluated or addressed at Eloy Detention Center. She has repeatedly endorsed symptoms consistent with PTSD and suggestive of another primary mood or psychotic disorder, and yet her screening for these conditions has been inadequate." and "[Diane] is in urgent need of transfer or release to a setting that is able to ensure her physical and psychological safety, and to obtain appropriate treatment and evaluation from a psychiatrist."[13]

Another woman, Lola, who was detained in Eloy, recalled her six days in segregation, including three days on suicide watch, due to her severe mental health symptoms. Lola was kept alone in a cell with no mattress on suicide watch for about three days. She was only provided a "suicide smock" (a green Velcro vest that goes down to the knees) instead of her clothes. She noted to the Florence Project that because the floor was too cold to lay on and she didn't have access to a mattress, she took off the smock to lay on and was left naked in her cell.

Another woman, Amara, diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder attempted suicide by ingesting soap and attempting to tie a bedsheet around her neck. Medical records from Eloy confirm that a guard doused her with pepper spray in response to the suicide attempt. The medical records note that when Amara went to medical after she was pepper sprayed, "pt. [patient] repeatedly spit up, drooled, and said 'I just want to sleep, let me die, I don't want to be here anymore."[14] Amara was kept in segregation for about 20 consecutive days due to her mental health. During her time in segregation the medical records show that she consistently noted that she was stressed in segregation and asked to be let out.

[12] Medical records on file with authors.
[13] Letter on file with authors.
[14] Medical records on file with authors.

Excessive Pat Downs Strip Searches

In 2025, multiple clients informed the Florence Project that all detainees in Eloy who have a social visit now must endure two full-body strip searches, one before the visit, and one after the visit. Several people said that they believe the facility began strip searches after a family brought candy to their loved one to eat during their visit.

Many people have said that they asked their family members to stop visiting them because they felt so violated during strip searches. One woman described it as being sexually assaulted repeatedly. Contact visits with mandatory strip searches are the only form of free communication with family members and loved ones in the Eloy Detention Center since ICE ended its free phone call policy in June 2024, which provided 520 free minutes of phone calls to each detainee every month during the COVID-19 pandemic. In August 2024, ICE, a multi-billion-dollar agency, released a statement noting "fiscal challenges" as the reason to end the free phone minutes and noted that in-person visitation had been reinstated.[15] However, because many individuals in detention and their families are indigent and cannot pay for phone calls or video visitation, people are now forced to choose between in-person visitation with humiliating and degrading strip searches or not talking with their loved ones at all.

Rosa, a 66-year-old grandmother, described her experience with being strip searched after visiting with her family:

> "This detention has excessive violations against human rights. In the family visit area, they watch us excessively and we are never out of view of the officials, but nevertheless when we return to our cells they strip us totally naked and make us bend and lower ourselves down to check our private parts, which is a shameful humiliation."[16]

Several individuals in Eloy have reported to the Florence Project the use of excessive and intrusive physical searches, also called "pat downs." From what the Florence Project has learned, it appears that individuals are being patted down up to nine times a day. The pat downs usually occur when individuals are going to and from their cells and the dining area, and it appears that

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[15] US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "State on free cell phone minutes provided during the COVID-19 public health emergency," August 6, 2024, *available at* https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/statement-free-cellphone-minutes-provided-during-covid-19-public-health-emergency.

[16] Letter on file with authors. "Esta detención tiene exagerados violaciones hacia los derechos humanos. En el área de visitas de nuestra familia los revisaron exageradamente y en ningún momento estamos fuera de la vista de los oficiales, pero sin embargo cuando nos regresamos a las celdas, nos desnudan totalmente y nos hacen que no hagachemos para revisar nuestros partes íntimos, lo cual es una vergonzosa humillación."

the guards are concerned with confiscating food taken from the dining hall, considering it "contraband." The Florence Project spoke with three individuals who filed Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) complaints as a result of the intrusive pat downs, with one PREA complaint substantiated. These individuals have also noted retaliation and threats made by officers due to the PREA allegations. It is likely that there are several more PREA complaints that have been filed by individuals in Eloy that the Florence Project is unaware of, and probable that there are PREA violations that are going unreported. People have reported that the pat downs are dehumanizing, uncomfortable, and traumatic, with guards feeling around and underneath women's breasts and between men's legs. Many individuals in detention have suffered serious prior harm and abuse including physical and sexual violence. They report that subjecting them to multiple pat downs, particularly while mainly looking to confiscate food, is unnecessary and degrading.

One man, Jose, shared with the Florence Project that in late July 2024 he attempted to bring bread back to his cell from the dining area to use with the peanut butter that he had purchased from commissary, as the commissary does not sell bread. He reported that while he was leaving the dining area, a guard patted him down and found the bread, which then resulted in a more intrusive pat down, to the point that Jose felt that the guard was tapping and pushing on his genital area.

Jose said that a captain was nearby, and he told the captain that he did not like the way that the guard was patting him down. He reported that the captain then took him aside and said that because he was "stealing" bread that the captain could put him in segregation. According to Jose the captain further stated guards were allowed to search between his legs like the police do and that if Jose filed an allegation or grievance that it would just come back saying that it was a routine pat down. Jose reported that when he continued to insist that he was touched inappropriately the captain disregarded him and told him he was just angry about being caught with bread. Jose noted that he was told multiple times that, like police, guards can reach in their pants and grab detained peoples' bodies if they are looking for something during a pat down. He stated to the Florence Project, "Sometimes they touch you kind of weird and you feel awkward," and "they need to treat us humane."

Abuse and Intimidation by Guards and ICE

In a letter written to the Florence Project, one woman in Eloy reported,

> "Today I decided that I cannot be quiet any longer. I'm sharing this information hoping that everything changes in immigration detention centers, since we are not treated with respect, we are surrounded by yelling from the guards; as we walk, as we wake up as we eat. Here we are not

> treated with dignity, respect or equality. There are racist guards, the employees minimize the violence…"[17]

In recent months, more people in Eloy have reported to the Florence Project discrimination, abuse, and intimidation by guards and ICE officers.

One woman shared that during recreation her housing unit was only allowed to be in a spot in the yard that was in full sun, in the summer, in the middle of the desert. She mentioned many of the women had a hard time and felt faint in the sun. When she told a guard about it, he callously told her that was their "punishment" for being immigrants.

Others have described humiliating and racist treatment from guards in their housing units. People have reported that guards have called them 'filthy,' say they 'live like animals' in their home countries, tear down pictures of their loved ones that they have on the wall in their cells, tell them they have no rights, and have called them 'worthless immigrants' and 'pigs.' Guards have also reportedly threatened people with consequences and segregation if they file complaints.

One man in Eloy reported to the Florence Project that in June, after he requested his deportation to Cuba, he was taken to a room with officers who asked him if he wanted to sign for a deportation to Mexico instead. When he said no, an officer reportedly told him they would force him to go to Mexico, and he would sleep in Mexico that night. The officer grabbed his wrist and forced his thumb into ink and onto the form, acting as his signature. He then reported that guards came into the room, forced him onto the ground, aggravating his ribs and a surgical wound from recent abdominal surgery, handcuffed him and put a hood over his head. He was reportedly forced into a van and driven to Mexico while still in his detention uniform. However, he was never taken out of the van and was instead brought back to Eloy. Once back in Eloy, he was placed in segregation for 30 days for "resisting" the officers. About two months later, he was again forcibly put into a van by guards and dropped in Mexico.

Another man in Eloy reported that upon his arrival an officer gave him a piece of paper and told him and told him if he signed for his deportation that he would be given 1000 dollars. He said that he asked what would happen if he did not sign, and he was told that he would just be deported anyway. He refused to sign the paper. He then reported that the following week ICE officers came into his cell to pressure him to sign for his deportation, but he again refused. About a month later he reported that he was called to an office where several ICE officers were

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[17] Letter on file with authors. "Hoy decidí no callar más, compartiendo esta información esperando cambie todo en los centros de detención migratoria, ya que no somos tratados con respeto, buenos tratos, rodeados de gritos de los oficiales, al caminar, al despertar, al comer, aquí no recibimos un trato digno, respetuoso e igualitario." "Hay guardias racistas, los empleados minimizan la violencia…"

gathered and who tried to intimidate him to sign for his deportation. He noted that they were verbally aggressive, raising their voices, saying he had no right to be here and that they would deport him on the same day if he didn't sign. He refused to sign, but he reported that they continued to yell at him and eventually, out of fear and intimidation, he signed the paper.

ICE and Corecivic's Abuse Will Continue Unimpeded and Without Oversight

The examples shared in this report represent only a portion of the abuses and neglect that thousands of people are facing in the Eloy Detention Center. Given the dismantling of oversight agencies and the inability to hold any of these agencies or their actors accountable, ICE and Corecivic are essentially allowed to act with impunity.

While the only sure way to end abuse in immigration detention is to end immigration detention itself, there needs to be immediate action to impose oversight agencies and inspections into the Eloy Detention and actual, accessible ways to enforce consequences and hold ICE and Corecivic accountable for past, current, and future abuses.