

October speaker Emily Stuart is a volunteer with the St. Louis Rapid Response Coalition, launched in February 2025 to inform immigrants of their rights during encounters with immigration enforcement authorities, and to provide material and legal support to detained immigrants and their immediate family.

**Background:** In 2024, a bipartisan immigration reform act was before Congress, then abandoned by Republicans so candidate Trump could run on immigration enforcement as a key platform

## **Eroding constitutional norms**

This administration's massive actions on immigration erode constitutional norms and expand Executive power - a concern for all Americans regardless of their opinion on immigration:

### **Freedom of speech:**

- Student visas revoked for positions criticizing their university's positions.
- National Guard federalized to police protesters -cost taxpayers \$120 million - overruled by courts

### **Unreasonable search and seizure**

- ICE agents wearing masks and driving unmarked vehicles seizing immigrants off the street, breaking down door, and pulling folks out of car window.

### **Deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law."**

- Venezuelan men sent to El Salvador prison based on secret, flimsy, and unchallengeable allegations.
- Detaining people, even those granted hearings, outside courtrooms, disrupting access to justice.
- Eliminating Bond hearings for millions of undocumented immigrants

### **Cruel and Unusual Punishment.**

- Detention centers with inhumane conditions, overcrowding, alleged abuse, contaminated food, and forced separation from children.
- 3.5 million pending cases in immigration court. About 1,200 deportation flights a month across the US
- Attempt to strip US-born children of noncitizen parents of their automatic citizenship as guaranteed by the 14th amendment.

## **Myth Busting:**

### **They should have come "the right way".**

- The pathway to American citizenship is long, complex, and financially draining, generally limited to three routes: employment, family reunification, or humanitarian protection. Each of these avenues is highly regulated, with strict numerical caps and eligibility requirements.

- From new employment restrictions to terminated humanitarian protections, it has become more difficult for people to come to—and stay—in this country legally. Even many of those here with authorization have been pushed off the path to citizenship.
- The Trump administration has simply stopped processing applications for groups including refugees, asylum seekers, and beneficiaries of parole programs. It seeks to reduce how long a work permit is valid for, increasing the risk that work permits will lapse while stuck in processing backlogs, and to impose astronomical fees each time a noncitizen renews their status.
- The Trump administration is making it harder to access legal immigration status, let alone U.S. citizenship. The amount of time it takes to become a citizen - from eligibility for a green card to naturalization – can run between five and 25 years. Other immigrants face an impossible wait time just for green cards. For example the processing time for certain high-skilled immigrant workers from India can be 150 years.

### **Immigrants drain social services**

- Studies show that, over their lifetimes, immigrants — regardless of legal status — pay more in taxes than they use in public services, helping to support programs and services for all Americans. While undocumented immigrants may receive limited services, their contributions to the economy and tax systems outweigh any costs associated with the public services they use.
- Federal law restricts most undocumented immigrants from accessing major public assistance programs like Medicaid, Social Security, SNAP and other means-tested benefits. Access to public services is generally limited to emergency medical care, primary care at Federally Qualified Health Centers, public education for children, short-term use of shelters and soup kitchens during emergencies, and the WIC program, which provides nutrition support for pregnant and postpartum women and young children.
- ***NEW! Shutdown edition:*** Republicans accused Democrats of forcing the closure because they want to give health care access to immigrants in the U.S. illegally. Democrats do want to extend Affordable Care Act subsidies set to expire at the end of the year and roll back Medicaid cuts in the recent tax and spending bill. That proposal would NOT give health care to immigrants who lack legal status. It would restore access to certain health care programs for legal immigrants who lose access under the new law. Ending humanitarian parole and Temporary Protected Status for many people has made them newly ineligible for Medicaid and health plans on the ACA marketplace.

### **Immigrants take American Jobs**

- The idea that undocumented immigrants take jobs away from U.S. citizens is rooted in the false assumption that the labor market has a fixed number of jobs. In reality, there are currently more job vacancies than there are workers available to take them.
- Immigrants, including undocumented individuals, often fill critical labor gaps by taking on roles in industries like agriculture, construction, and food processing that many Americans are unwilling to do. These contributions meet essential labor demands and drive economic growth by supporting industries that depend on a steady workforce.

### **Immigrants are criminals**

- Research consistently shows that immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, are less likely to commit crimes than U.S.-born individuals. State-level analyses show no significant correlation between immigrant population sizes and crime rates. In fact, communities with higher immigrant populations often experience lower crime rates. From 1980 to 2022, as the immigrant share of the U.S. population more than doubled, the total crime rate dropped by over 60%, debunking the misconception that immigration fuels criminal activity.

## **The Detention Machine**

*The administration has set a goal of arresting 3,000 people per day and deporting 1 million per year. Ramping up infrastructure to meet these goals has cost tax payers an estimated \$88 billion annually and reduced GDP by 4.2% while reduced training, background checks, and oversight of officers.*

- The \$170.1 billion in new spending for immigration enforcement under the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” makes ICE the highest-funded federal law enforcement agency in history

- ***Who benefits? Private prisons!*** CoreCivic reported total revenue of **\$538.2 million** during the company’s second quarter of 2025. GEO Group, ICE’s largest contractor, reported second-quarter revenue of **\$636.2 million**.

- Agents from at least five other federal agencies have been reassigned to ICE duties. Even civilian staff in the Department of Defense are being recruited for “deployments” as ICE officers.

- ***NEW! Government Shutdown edition: Because most of ICE’s work is deemed “essential” law enforcement work, throughout the shutdown the current levels of immigration enforcement continue, including arrests and raids, rapid expansion of the detention system, and deportations.***

- It is impossible to meet this massive goal if enforcement is limited to immigrants with violent criminal histories or without legal permission to be in the US. This leads to (1) removing existing legal protections from some folks so they are now “illegal”, and (2) detaining anyone, regardless of criminal background.

- There is large-scale revocation of temporary protected status and humanitarian parole, including for Afghan immigrants who risked their lives to assist US troops during the war. Compliance records of many international students have been deleted, making their status unclear. And universities are being pressured to stop enrolling international students at all. All these immigrants “came the right way.”

- As of September 1 the number of individuals in immigration detention reached a record-high of over 61,000, with 182,000 more on “detention alternatives” i.e. ankle monitors. Many individuals in detention have work visas, work authorization or have been granted asylum by the court. Almost everyone has a pending immigration case. 70.4% have no criminal conviction. Many of the “convictions” are minor offenses, including traffic violations.

## **Enforcement in Missouri**

- Most arrests leading to deportation are made by local police, often following traffic stops based on racial profiling through skin color or type of vehicle. Local police transfer the immigrant into ICE custody.
- ICE has also begun carrying out enforcement actions courts as immigrants attend their hearings. Even individuals who entered through a port of entry with permission are subject to immigration detention following their court hearings. This includes victims of crime who have been certified as being helpful to the investigation or prosecution of a crime.
- Many immigrants are opting to “self-deport” to their countries of origin, rather than wait for the US Government to detain them and separate them from their families.

## **Economic Impact**

- The U.S. economy has lost up to 1.2 million foreign-born workers since January 2025. The looming worker shortage\_especially affects agriculture, construction, and hospitality, contributing to shortages of food and housing. Restaurant raids are increasing because they tend to produce up a higher volume.
- Rural hospitals that struggle to recruit domestic physicians now have doctors from abroad stuck in immigration backlog while patients go without critical services.
- The 53 million US immigrants compose 15% of the population but account for 40% of population growth. (MO is losing residents, leading to lost federal \$ and representation strength).
- 46% of immigrants are naturalized, 23% are green card holders, and 4% are temporary lawful residents. Only 27% are unauthorized (about 11 million). Of that, about half have some form of protection (i.e. work authorization). Even so, that 27% pays \$96.7 billion in taxes each year.
- Missouri’s 300,000 immigrants - 5% of the population - contribute \$3.3 BILLION in taxes.

## **Community Defense Efforts**

Several concurrent defense strategies operate in the STL region, mostly volunteer driven:

- **The Rapid Response Hotline** operates 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, as a central phone number for individuals to call if they are experiencing immigration enforcement and need help asserting their rights, or to seek support for detained loved ones.

Volunteer Hotline Operators track down the whereabouts of the detained individuals, first locating them in a municipal or county jail, following their movement to ICE offices and re-location to one of the four county jails (Greene, Phelps, Ste. Genevieve, and Ozark) that host ICE detention centers, and receive **a per diem per head from the federal government.**

Individuals are moved quickly, with no notice to families, and the systems of location often lag to update. There are often windows of several days where families have no idea where their loved ones are. Next, Hotline operators help the family establish communications, which requires downloading a phone app and paying per minute.

Operators help family members navigate the return of impounded vehicles since many detainees are picked up driving to work. Sometimes impound lot owners call immigration on family members.

All hotline shifts are staffed by an “attorney on call” who can answer immediate legal questions for the operator when a call comes in, i.e. status of a person’s pending case. Interviews are scheduled between the detained immigrant, a volunteer attorney, and a volunteer interpreter to uncover any potential legal remedy, protection, or relief for the person, and to document any mistreatment of the individuals in detention.

Family members are referred to community partners in order to have basic needs met. The majority of the persons in detention are the breadwinners for the family. There are also significant mental health concerns for detainees and their loved ones.

The Detention Liaison acts as the go-between for affiliated groups like Abide in Love (provides pen pals for detained individuals) and the Detained Intake Volunteer Attorney program of Rapid Response.

**Community Immigration Watch groups:** Groups document and communicate immigration enforcement presence in real-time to keep individuals safe and informed, and maintain a record of enforcement patterns and violations of due process. During an encounter with ICE, targeted individuals still have the right to remain silent and right to refuse a search of their person or property without a warrant. Via documentation we know that those rights are not being respected.

**Crisis Preparation Workshops:** A network of more than 300 volunteer interpreters, attorneys, faith leaders, and concerned allies are facilitating monthly Power of Attorney Workshops and Passports for US Citizen Children workshops. Power of Attorney documents empower a trusted agent to become financially responsible for the family’s children and property if all legal guardians are detained and deported. Approximately 79% of children of undocumented immigrant parents are U.S. citizens by birth. Parents leaving the United States need passport documents for their citizen children.

**Accompaniment:** Immigrant Accompaniment volunteers go with immigrants to immigration court, ICE check-ins, civil and criminal court, schools, hospitals, and other places to provide emotional and physical solidarity and to signal to authorities that immigrant allies are watching.

**Immigrant Family Emergency Response Fund (IFER) :** originated to provide direct cash assistance to mixed status and undocumented families during the pandemic - re-launched in 2025 after the presidential election. To date, \$457,500 has been distributed to almost 1,000 families. Fundraising efforts continue, as the need for assistance grows daily.

## **Conclusion**

Democracy is in decline around the world. For the first time in decades, there are more closed autocracies than liberal democracies in the world. We can stop the US from becoming one of them by strengthening institutions, reinforcing democratic norms, and building popular resistance against encroaching autocracy.

- Demand Free and unfettered elections. Watch for changes to how we vote, who can vote, and redistricting efforts.
- An independent judiciary is essential to interpret and uphold laws. Keep your eyes on how judges and courts are rendered impotent or criticized publicly.

- Citizens must have the freedom to express their opinions, assemble with others, access information, and have a free press.
- Multiple political parties and independent organizations must be free to express different viewpoints. Keep your eye on how dissidents, even within the President's own party, are treated.
- A commitment to the peaceful and lawful transfer of authority from one elected government to another is a crucial aspect of democracy. Be alert to attacks on this tradition.

## Ways to Get Involved

**Power of Attorney Workshops** - Once a month, usually evening and weekend. Bilingual & Monolingual roles - *Immigrant families are partnered with an attorney and notary to complete legal documents that designate another person to have POA in the event the adults in the family are detained, and there are young children at home.* Point of Contact: Emily Stuart, [emily.stuart@mmfstl.org](mailto:emily.stuart@mmfstl.org)

**Passport Workshops** - Timing: Every Thursday morning. Bilingual Eng/Spa preferred; some monolingual roles - *Immigrant families get their American-born children passports in the event they are all removed from the US and the kids need to travel.* Point of Contact: Kevin Kuehl, [migrantministl@gmail.com](mailto:migrantministl@gmail.com)

**Accompaniment** - Timing: Monday-Friday 9-5pm, appointments can take several hours. Bilingual & Monolingual roles - *Volunteers go with immigrants for routine check-ins with ICE/ISAP downtown. Optional: transport them to appointments, wait with them in the office, and observe/witness/document what happens. Folks are now being detained during these check-ins, so you would need to be emotionally prepared that your person may not come back with you.* Point of Contact: Annie Aeschbacher, [accompaniment.irm@gmail.com](mailto:accompaniment.irm@gmail.com)

**IFER Fund:** Timing: Quarterly, you set your schedule. Bilingual & Monolingual roles - *direct cash aid to immigrant families fund. Volunteers help distribute funds to immigrant families around the region. You will be partnered with a bilingual volunteer and only go to public places. This happens on a schedule agreed upon between the volunteer and the immigrant. The first step for this is to fill out this form: <http://bit.ly/STLRRVOLS>. Select IFER as your project.* Point of Contact: Sara Ruiz, [sara@ashreifoundation.org](mailto:sara@ashreifoundation.org) To donate to the Fund: <https://youthbridge.org/immigrant-family-emergency-response/>

**Rapid Response:** Timing: 7am-7pm every day. You set your schedule. Bilingual & Monolingual roles - *Bilingual individuals staff the hotline, triage calls to support families of detained loved ones, and interpret for detainee intake attorney meetings. Monolingual individuals support efforts to locate detainees, get vehicles out of impound, coordinate social service referrals, and serve as volunteer attorneys.* Point of Contact: Judy McGrath, [judy@ashreifoundation.org](mailto:judy@ashreifoundation.org)

**Direct Service:** There are several nonprofits working directly with the most vulnerable immigrants, and they are always looking for volunteers: LifeWise StL - MICA Project - St. Francis Community Services - Abide In Love