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For Immediate Release
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Civil Rights Group Hails End to Passaic County Detentions, Demands Detainees be Released, not Transferred

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will no longer house immigrant detainees to Passaic County Jail. This is a significant victory for civil rights and for the detainees. Passaic County Jail was the site of constant abuses of detainees' human rights. Equally important, the ending of this contract means that fewer places will be available for ICE to hold immigrant detainees, so fewer detainees will be held.

NJCRDC and other groups are planning a demonstration Sunday, January 8, at 1 PM, across the street from the Passaic County Jail at Main & Grand Streets in Paterson, NJ to press our demands that the immigrant detainees now unconstitutionally held there be released at once, not transferred to other facilities.

The NJ Civil Rights Defense Committee has been demanding the termination of the contract for the nearly four years. Since 2002 our group has been exposing the extensive human rights abuses taking place at Passaic County Jail to the media and government officials. NJCRDC organized numerous protests at Passaic County Jail and in Paterson demanding that the detainees be released. In addition, we organized protests at the Passaic County Freeholder Meetings to educate them about the conditions in the jail and to demand a termination of the contract. We provided information about the abuse of detainees by dogs to David Zwerdling from NPR which resulted in an award-winning story that culminated in ICE banning dogs from immigration facilities. Finally, we have participated wholeheartedly in the Office of Inspector General Audit of Passaic County Jail from which a final report is to be issued in March, 2006.

These protests on the outside have been greatly reinforced by the growing protests of the detainees on the inside, who have started many hunger strikes since 2002 and repeatedly protested their abuse. On December 17, 94 immigrant detainees in the jail signed a petition demanding that the contract be terminated.

These protests have finally forced Jerry Speziale, Sheriff of Passaic County Jail to terminate the contract. At every step of the way, Speziale, and the Passaic County Freeholders, resisted taking steps to stop the ongoing torture and abuse at the jail. Not only have they denied the systemic abuses, but when this is not possible, they blame the immigrants themselves, calling them dangerous criminals to justify the level of brutality used against them.

But this is not true - the immigrants are people caught up in a cruel and unconstitutional system. The immigrant detainees are not being held on any criminal charges, and thus they are not criminals. Immigrant detainees are being held on administrative, not criminal, charges. A Federal law passed in 1996 after the Oklahoma City bombing made detention of administrative immigration cases mandatory, in violation of the Bill of Rights' guarantee that no one is to be deprived of liberty without being charged with a crime. This means that no matter how sick they are or how desperately families need them, immigrants facing administrative charges, during the course of their legal proceedings must be held in jail. While guilty of no crimes, the detainees are punished by being held in horrible county jails like Passaic where they are denied access to medical care, decent diets, family contact and the outdoors.

The termination of the contract at Passaic County Jail is a good step forward, but it is not enough. The entire system of holding immigrants facing administrative charges in punitive detention is unconstitutional and must stop immediately. NJCRDC hopes that other communities will force the termination of many more contracts with county jails, dismantling the detention system.

We demand that the detainees now at Passaic County Jail be immediately released back to their families and communities and not be transferred to another county jail where they will face similar abuses. Former Passaic County Jail immigrant detainee Jean Alexander, a member of NJCRDC, says: "Simply transferring detainees from one place to another is not the answer. The detention in itself is illegal and the detainees should not be transferred, they should be released." If the government wants to hold the immigrants, it must bring criminal charges against them. If the government has no grounds for criminal charges then the immigrant detainees, both at Passaic and at all other detention facilities, must be released immediately.

There are, however, criminal charges to be brought—against those responsible for the abuses at Passaic. Since 9/11 the investigations that NJCRDC and other human rights groups have conducted indicate systematic ongoing torture and abuse of innocent people. Sheriff Speziale and the others responsible for these abuses must be brought to justice. This pattern of abuse and torture is not isolated to Passaic County Jail. It is endemic throughout the jails in which immigrant detainees are held and will only stop when all the immigrant detainees are released.