

Veronica Fernandez-Diaz
State of Louisiana

DECLARATION OF VERONICA FERNANDEZ-DIAZ

I attest to the below under penalty of perjury.

1. My name is Veronica Fernandez-Diaz. I am a Project Coordinator for the Southeast Immigrant Freedom Initiative (SIFI) of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Alexandria, Louisiana. SIFI provides pro bono legal services to immigrants detained at Pine Prairie ICE Processing Center and LaSalle ICE Processing Center, and SIFI represents respondents in the Oakdale and LaSalle Immigration Courts. I mainly work with people detained in the LaSalle ICE Processing Center.
2. Beginning on Monday, 23rd of March 2020, I have received multiple reports from people in detention at LaSalle regarding the use of tear gas and/or pepper spray. These involve two main incidents.
3. The first incident reportedly occurred on Monday, 23rd of March 2020. The caller I spoke to stated that a couple of detainees in one dorm were refusing food and attempted to strike, demanding that the facility take measures to protect them from COVID-19. The news went out that two detainees at LaSalle in dorm OA were infected with coronavirus and that dorm was quarantined. This news is what led to the attempted strike from dorm OC. They did not want to eat the food and were afraid that it was going to give them the virus. One of the officers called for reinforcement and they came into the dorm with toxic gas or tear gas and started fighting two detainees. They sprayed the whole dorm as a result. The two detainees involved are now in solitary confinement according to the caller.
4. During that Monday incident, one of the detainees involved ran towards the back and the guards used the toxic gas to stop him but ended up spraying another detainee who was not involved in the strike. That detainee was coughing and vomiting resulting in him falling and ending up in the hospital. The doctors told the detainee that he was fine but when he returned to the dorm, his chest was still in pain. He was told that the gas takes a while to leave the system.
5. The second incident occurred on Wednesday, 25th of March 2020. The caller reported that he was having trouble with his voice and kept coughing. He stated that there was an altercation in one of the women's dorms and the guards used pepper spray. He was in the library and passed by when the incident occurred, so he was affected too, and he saw a bunch of the women coughing and choking. I asked him if he wanted to continue our conversation another day, so he could heal first, and he said yes.
6. Various callers reported similar instances of panic among detainees due to fear of COVID-19. They express fear, particularly, because there are so many of them packed in one place. They are afraid that if one person gets it, they will all become sick due to the close proximity with other detainees and inability to distance themselves from one

another. One caller stated that the staff keeps coming in and out without any protection, so they fear that they will bring it inside. Another caller stated that ICE visited and told them a bit about the virus but did not bring a medical practitioner with them. A detainee reportedly asked ICE if they would still bring more people inside despite the highly contagious nature of the virus and ICE responded, “of course, we will. We will continue to bring people in and court is still happening.” Indeed, one caller reported that five more people were added in his dorm that week. It seems that court, however, may now be on pause.

7. During this COVID-19 stress and panic among people in detention, one caller reported that calls that they dial from inside the detention center are limited to two, 5-minute calls. I am unsure of how long this limitation has been in place nor how long it will last, but another caller mentioned that this was done as a coronavirus precaution. Although this limitation is not the case with scheduled legal calls, this inhibits people’s ability to communicate thoroughly with us and/or their family members if they have emergencies or updates outside of those schedule legal calls. I will note that I received another call a couple of days later and did not receive the limit warning that time. I am unaware of why this inconsistency occurred or if it applies to every caller similarly.
8. The last time I requested in-person visits at the LaSalle detention center was for March 12th, 2020. This was during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. In my visit request email, I also asked if I could bring disinfecting wipes or spray, to which they did not respond. I showed up to the front office desk holding a bag with gloves and disinfecting wipes and asked the front desk officer if I could take them in as a precaution, but the guard told me that she was instructed to not allow me to bring these items inside. The guard also said that they try to clean up after every visit. I asked if I could bring gloves inside at the very least and she said yes. I left the rest in the car. Outside visitors did not have any protection such as gloves or medical masks at that point and the staff only had gloves as far as I could tell. I am not sure if that is the case now since I have not returned since.
9. In the past week, some callers reported that their court dates have been postponed. I have not heard from any callers if they have received more information regarding these changes.



3/29/2020

Signature

Date

