

House Democrats seek answers after ICE agents arrest possible victim of human trafficking



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U.S. House Democrats are looking for answers after Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents showed up at a Queens courthouse to arrest a woman believed to be a victim of human trafficking last month.

The ICE agents made three arrests outside the Queens Criminal Courthouse and had also planned to cuff a woman from China who was being tried for sex work in a human trafficking court. At the time, she was protected by lawyers from Legal Aid who asked the judge hold her on bail to allow her to leave the courthouse.

ICE’s appearance at the courthouse drew immediate criticism from Democrats and immigration activists. But ICE’s actual policy for seeking out and arresting victims of human trafficking remains unclear. There is also no public information about the number of people served by ICE’s Victims Assistance Program, which is meant to support victims of human trafficking.

In a letter to Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly and ICE's acting director Thomas Homan, New York City's 12 Democratic U.S. representatives demanded clarification on ICE's policies for stalking human trafficking courts and asked for VAP data.

“It is simply unconscionable that ICE would target such a marginalized population,” said Rep. Nydia Velázquez (D-NY), who spearheaded the letter. “Tactics like this could well mean that other victims of trafficking are less likely to step out of the shadows and seek help they might otherwise obtain. We are demanding a clear explanation of DHS’ and ICE’s policies when it comes to trafficking victims.”



Under current policies, ICE agents are instructed to steer clear of making arrests at “sensitive locations” like schools, hospitals, and places of worship. (John Moore/Getty Images)

Human trafficking courts in New York are meant to give alternate sentences to those convicted of sex work, many of whom are themselves victims of human trafficking or other crimes.

Under current policies, ICE agents are instructed to steer clear of making arrests at “sensitive locations” like schools, hospitals, and places of worship. House Democrats are now urging the agency to add courthouses to that list and to clarify their policies for identifying and approaching victims of human trafficking.

The House Democrats have asked that ICE respond to their letter within 30 days.