



The William Wilberforce Center
For Justice & Human Rights

Understanding Immigration Detention and Removal A Guide for Sponsors

Jeff Weber, Executive Director
The Wilberforce Center



To our friends and sponsors:

Thank you for stepping forward to support someone in immigration detention. Serving as a sponsor is not an easy role. It often comes at a time of fear, urgency, and uncertainty, and it requires generosity, patience, and commitment. Your willingness to help provides stability and hope to someone navigating a complex and intimidating system.

Sponsors play a vital role in the immigration process. By offering housing, guidance, and reassurance, you help ensure that your loved one can safely return to their community while continuing their legal case. Your support also helps the immigration court understand that the person will not face this process alone.

We are grateful for the care and responsibility you are taking on. This guide was created to support you—to help you understand what is happening and how your involvement can make a meaningful difference.

When someone you care about is taken into immigration detention, everything can feel confusing and overwhelming. This guide is written for sponsors—the family members or friends who step forward to help someone who has been detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Its purpose is to explain, in clear and simple language, what is happening, what your role may be, and how you can help.

This guide does not give legal advice. Immigration law is complicated, and every case is different. Instead, this guide is meant to help you understand the process so you can better support your loved one during a very stressful time.

Thank you again for serving,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeff Weber".

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Understanding Immigration Detention and Removal

A Guide for Sponsors

Immigration Detention: What It Means

Immigration detention happens when ICE holds a non-citizen in a detention center or jail while the government decides whether that person can stay in the United States or must leave. Detention is a civil process, not a criminal punishment, but many people are held in jail-like facilities.

People can end up in immigration detention for many reasons. Some are arrested by local police and then transferred to ICE. Others are detained after applying for an immigration benefit, traveling outside the United States, or because of a past immigration order they may not have known about. Often, detention happens suddenly, giving families little time to prepare.

Removal (Deportation): The Ongoing Case

Once a person is detained, the government usually starts a process called removal—also known as deportation. This is the legal process where the government tries to order the person to leave the United States.

Being in removal proceedings means the person must go to immigration court and appear before an immigration judge. They have the right to hire a lawyer, but the government does not provide a free attorney. Even if a person is released from detention, the removal case continues. Release does not mean the case is over.

Bond: A Way Out of Detention

For some people, release from detention is possible through a bond. A bond is a financial promise made to the government. It means that if ICE releases the person, they promise to attend all immigration court hearings and follow the judge's orders. Bond is not available to everyone. If it is granted, the judge usually sets an amount of at least \$1,500, and sometimes much more. The full amount must be paid at once to the Department of Homeland Security. If the person goes to all court hearings and follows the rules, the bond money may be returned at the end of the case.

The Sponsor's Role

This is where sponsors play a critical role. A sponsor is usually a close family member or trusted friend who agrees to help the detained person once they are released. Sponsors often provide a place to live, help with transportation to court, and sometimes pay the bond.

Judges want to see that a released person will have stability. A sponsor who has lawful immigration status, a steady address, and a willingness to help can make a strong difference in a bond decision.

The Sponsor Letter: Your Voice to the Judge

One of the most important things a sponsor can do is write a sponsor letter. This letter is given to the immigration judge and helps show that the detained person will have support if released.

In the letter, you should explain who you are, how you know the detained person, and what your immigration status is. You should describe where the person will live and promise that you will help them attend all court hearings. It is also important to include copies of proof of your immigration status and proof of your address, such as a utility bill or lease.

This letter is often one of the most powerful pieces of evidence in a bond case.

How Judges Decide on Bond

When deciding whether to grant bond, judges focus on two main concerns. First, they ask whether the person is likely to attend all court hearings. Family support, a stable home, and a history of following court rules all help answer this question.

Second, judges consider whether the person is a danger to the community. They may review past arrests or convictions, but they also look at evidence of rehabilitation, responsibility, and positive community ties. Letters of support and proof of stability can make a real difference.

Paying the Bond

If a bond is granted, it must be paid using a money order or cashier's check made out to the Department of Homeland Security. The person paying the bond must bring identification, the detained person's full name, and their immigration "A-number." Bond can usually be paid at the detention center or at a nearby ICE office.

Life After Release

Once released, the person must attend every immigration court hearing. Missing even one hearing can result in an automatic deportation order and loss of the bond money.

Sponsors play an important role by helping keep track of court dates and making sure transportation is available.

After release, the immigration case is usually moved to a court closer to where the sponsor lives, making it easier to attend hearings.

Getting the Bond Money Back

Bond money is returned only after the case is fully finished and only if the person followed all court rules. This process can take months, and sometimes longer. It is very important to keep all paperwork and receipts given by ICE.

Final Thoughts for Sponsors

Serving as a sponsor is a serious responsibility, but it can also be a lifeline for someone in detention. Your support—providing housing, guidance, and stability—can make a lasting difference during one of the most difficult moments in a person’s life. Immigration detention and removal are stressful for everyone involved. Understanding the process can help reduce fear and confusion. Whenever possible, encourage your loved one to seek help from a qualified immigration attorney or legal service provider.

Checklist for Your Bond Hearing

You do **not** need every item on this list. Turn in as many documents as you can. More evidence can help lower your bond and strengthen your case.

☐ **Letters from people who know you**

Ask friends, family members, or employers to write a letter to the Judge. The letter should say:

- How they know you
- Why they think you are a good person
- Why you should be released
- Why you should be allowed to stay in the United States

If a letter is not in English, you must include an English translation and a Certificate of Translation.

Each person who writes a letter must include a copy of their ID (driver's license, green card, or passport).

☐ **Drawings from your children**

If your children are too young to write letters, ask them to draw pictures of you spending time together as a family.

☐ **Photos of you with your family**

Include pictures of you with your spouse, children, and other family members.

☐ **A letter from you**

Write a letter to the Judge explaining:

- What you have learned if you had trouble with the police in the past
- How you have changed and why you will not get into trouble again
- Why you want to be released (for example, to work, support your family, or spend time with your children)

☐ **Proof of how long you've lived in the U.S.**

Gather papers that show you have lived in the United States for a long time, such as:

- Rent receipts
- Utility bills
- Your children's birth certificates with your name on them

☐ **Proof of hardship for your family while you are detained**

Show how your detention is hurting your family. This can include:

- Bills, overdue notices, or debt letters

- Letters explaining if you cared for a family member or helped someone who was sick

□ **Proof that you own property in the U.S.**

Include copies of documents for things you own, like:

- A house
- A car
- A trailer

This shows the Judge that you have strong ties to the U.S. and will come to your court hearings.

□ **Proof of community involvement**

If you go to church, volunteer, or help in your community, ask a leader to write a letter for you. If you can't get a letter, be ready to tell the Judge about these activities at your hearing.

□ **Proof of rehabilitation or classes**

If you completed:

- AA or NA meetings
 - Anger management or domestic violence classes
- Include documents that show you attended and completed them.