

Lessons Learned from New Bedford, MA: How to Prepare Communities for Immigration Raids

On March 6, 2007, immigration and customs enforcement agents raided the Michael Bianco Factory in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Over 320 people were arrested and detained, many of whom were parents of young children. The MIRA Coalition responded by convening a group of community based organizations in the area and by sending two staff to the site of the raid to assist community members and families in any way possible. These initial efforts commenced a common response that has continued still. NILC has released a useful fact sheet outlining some of the important things to do to prepare for an immigration raid. Much of this advice is very useful in working with communities to prepare for a raid. In looking back at our response to the immigration raid in New Bedford, there were many lessons learned and I will highlight a few below.

For Families and Individuals

Prepare a document authorizing another adult to take care of minor children Because this raid affected so many parents, many of whom were primary caregivers, the question of who was taking care of all the children was an extremely serious one. Many of the children were left with other family members, babysitters, with teachers or in one case, with a landlord, for extended periods of time. This type of confusion and haphazard caregiving could have been avoided if parents had determined who they would want to take care of their children in the event of their detention. This information could have been shared with schools or child care providers in advance so everyone knew what would happen in this type of situation. This type of document could be a part of an entire safety plan for undocumented families.

Do Not Sign Any Documents Without First Speaking to A Lawyer

Though many people who were initially detained in this raid knew not to sign documents, there were several who did, making the outlook for their legal immigration relief more bleak later on. Advising and reminding community members constantly to remain silent and not sign anything is crucial. Also, role-playing situations in which ICE agents act intimidating, are a useful way to help people to remember.

For Community Based Groups

Be Prepared to Document Everything

One of the major lessons learned in the aftermath of New Bedford was the need to document everything that happened, both during the raid and after. It is critical to have one or two people (preferably bilingual) document what is happening during the raid, for example: how are community members being questioned/treated, are lawyers allowed to talk with detainees/clients, is ICE communicating with state agency groups like DSS and the police who are there to offer assistance, is ICE communicating with the media, are communications consistent, etc. Following the raid, it is useful to keep timelines (as centralized as possible) concerning communication with detainees and what is happening with them at any given time; communication with ICE; communication with other state agencies (DSS, etc.) and later communication with the legal advocacy team. These timelines can serve as a guide when the raid is being reviewed later by community groups or others about how they could be better prepared.

Use the Media...But Don't Let Them Take Advantage

The New Bedford raid was an instant media story, the likes of which the MIRA Coalition had not previously experienced, and getting the word into the public proved to be helpful. We had a press

conference the day of the raid and the day after and then as politicians (including the Governor and our Congressional delegation) made visits to the affected community, the story continued to be on center stage. Working with the media to keep this story in the news has proved helpful and effective in highlighting the problems of our immigration system, the unfair ways in which immigration raids are conducted and the inhumane conditions of detentions. It also was useful in advocating for the humanitarian release of certain detainees with compelling stories. However, there is a fine line between using the media and letting the media use family members to get a story. Most families were very generous and forthright in telling their stories to reporters though some were very fearful. It would have been helpful if we had worked with community members in advance on communicating with the media ie. how to speak with them, how to develop strong messages and how to be empowered to say “no” if you don’t want to speak to a reporter.

Communication Between Legal Team and Community Members

One of the areas in which we could definitely improve upon was the communication between the legal team and the families of the detainees. Our legal team did an excellent job working on two parallel but distinct efforts. The first effort was to prevent the re-location of all the detainees and to potentially deal with the whole group together in Massachusetts. The second effort which developed a little later than the first, was to match all detainees with attorneys as quickly as possible. The first effort utilized law firms and pro bono attorneys to move quickly in developing a motion to stop the transfer of detainees. The second effort also moved quickly but could have been more effective, I think, had more people been utilized in trying to find attorneys. In addition, regular (maybe thrice weekly) communication between lawyers and family members (in the native language of community) about what the lawyers were doing on a macro scale with the group and also on a micro scale with individual detainees, would have been very helpful in alleviating some of the confusion and in providing an honest assessment of the situation. I would not recommend using non-legal advocates as “middle-men” in these communications because it tends to dilute the information and may be seen as less credible. The legal team should also be prepared to communicate regularly with the media on what is happening in terms of a legal response.

Use Relationships with Local, State and Federal Officials and Politicians

In the aftermath of a large raid such as this, the relationships that we had and developed with local, state, and federal officials and politicians were critical. Making sure that these officials were continually kept abreast of any pertinent information that would help in securing the safety and release of the detainees was one of the most important responses. We were in regular (daily) communication with both the Governor’s office, the Department of Social Service and many of our congressional offices to keep them informed of changes in the health and well-being of detainees and their families so they could work to advocate for their release. Having these relationships in advance was very helpful.