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October 6, 2026

The Honorable Markwayne Mullin
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Mullin:

We write to express our concern regarding the substantial increase in domestic transfer flights (known as "shuffle" flights) that move individuals in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody between ICE detention centers and deportation staging facilities.[1] We are concerned by the scale and frequency of these transfers, the costs to taxpayers, and the impact repeated transfers can have on detainees' access to legal counsel, medical care, and other essential services.

The number of flights carrying detainees between immigration detention centers and deportation staging facilities has increased substantially since the Trump Administration took office. In 2025, 8,721 domestic transfer flights were recorded, compared to 3,975 in 2024.[2] In July 2026, 1,363 flights were recorded – a 75 percent increase from July 2025. In August 2026, 1,267 flights were recorded across 56 U.S. cities.[3] Most of these flights operated between facilities in the continental U.S., though some transported detainees to Guantanamo Bay.[4] The frequency with which individual detainees are transferred has also increased. Between January and July 2025, 12 percent of detainees were transferred four or more times.[5] A 2026 investigation identified detainees transferred nine, twelve, and thirteen times.[6] In another reported case, between May and July 2025, a 20-year-old man with no criminal record was transferred 15 times between facilities in Florida, California, Arizona, Hawaii, and Louisiana.[7]

We recognize that transfers may be necessary for legitimate operational reasons, including facility capacity and removal logistics. At the same time, the scale and frequency of these transfers raises questions about how ICE determines when a transfer is necessary, how frequently individual detainees are being moved, and the associated costs of these frequent transports. The growth in recorded domestic transfer flights has substantially outpaced the growth in ICE's detention population. The average number of individuals in ICE detention increased from approximately 40,000 in January 2025 to more than 65,000 in July 2026 – approximately 1.6 times as many people.[8] Over roughly the same period, the number of recorded domestic shuffle flights increased from 273 in January 2025 to 1,363 in July 2026 – nearly five times as many flights.[9] While recorded flight counts do not indicate how many detainees were transported on each flight, the magnitude of this increase warrants greater transparency regarding the purpose, frequency, and cost of these transfers. According to a 2026 Department of Defense Inspector General report, DHS conducted six multi-leg charter flights to transport detainees to and from Guantanamo Bay in

[1] https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/library/ice-flight-monitor-august-2026-report; https://www.9news.com/article/news/investigations/ice-air-americas-secret-deportation-network/73-38ceed5a-22d3-441a-8833-35b5e48ff100
[2] https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/library/ice-flight-monitor-august-2026-report
[3] https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/library/ice-flight-monitor-august-2026-report
[4] https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/library/ice-flight-monitor-august-2026-report
[5] https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2025-09-26/faster-more-frequent-transfers-of-immigrant-ice-detainees-sow-fear-and-cut-off-resources
[6] https://www.9news.com/article/news/investigations/ice-air-americas-secret-deportation-network/73-38ceed5a-22d3-441a-8833-35b5e48ff100
[7] https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2025-09-26/faster-more-frequent-transfers-of-immigrant-ice-detainees-sow-fear-and-cut-off-resources
[8] https://www.cnn.com/us/ice-immigration-detentions-arrests-deportations-deaths-vis
[9] Data provided by ICE Flight Monitor

the second quarter of 2026 at a cost of approximately $979,000.[10] We are concerned about the costs associated with the more than 18,000 domestic shuffle flights reportedly conducted since January 2025.[11]

Repeated transfers have significant consequences for detainees and their families. Transfers often disrupt communication with counsel, delay attorneys' and families' abilities to locate detainees (particularly due to lags and policy changes pertaining to ICE's Online Detainee Locator System), and interfere with continuity of medical care. Detainees have also reported difficulties accessing commissary funds following transfers.

Accordingly, we request that DHS provide written responses to the following questions::

1. **Domestic transfer flights:** How many domestic transfer flights did ICE conduct between January 1, 2025, and September 1, 2026? Please provide a monthly breakdown, including the departure and arrival cities for each leg of the transfer and the cost of each leg of these flights.
2. **Purpose of transfers:** What percentage of domestic transfer flights were to removal staging facilities, and what percentage were to other detention facilities?
3. **Facility capacity:** For domestic transfer flights to other detention facilities, how many transfers originated from facilities operating below 85 percent of capacity? Please provide the number of transfers by originating facility alongside the monthly average daily population of the facility at the time of the transfer.
4. **Frequency of transfers:** How many individuals in ICE custody were placed on domestic transfer flights more than once during this period? Please provide the number and percentage of detainees transferred one, two, three, four, or more times.
5. **Continuity of services:** What policies and procedures does ICE use to ensure that transferred detainees maintain uninterrupted access to counsel, medical care, prescribed medications, and commissary funds?
6. **Access to counsel:** If an individual transferred to a different ICE facility has a pending virtual attorney visit scheduled, how does ICE ensure that the meeting can take place? Additionally, how does ICE ensure that detainees who are transferred don't have to re-register their attorney for legal calls upon arrival at new facilities?
7. **Medical care:** What is ICE's policy when a receiving facility does not include a detainee's current medication in its formulary? Under that circumstance, what options is the detainee provided in terms of medical care?
8. **Ground transportation:** Between January 1, 2025 and September 1, 2026, how much has ICE spent on moving detainees between ICE facilities via ground transportation?
9. **Transfers by AOR:** For each ICE Area of Responsibility (AOR), please provide monthly counts of transfers out of the AOR involving individuals without a final order of removal. Please disaggregate these figures by air and ground transportation and include the estimated cost associated with these transfers.

We appreciate your attention to these concerns and request a timely response to the questions above.

Sincerely,

John Hickenlooper
United States Senator

[10] https://media.defense.gov/2026/Aug/27/2003988484/-1/-1/1/OSG_Q3_JUN2026_FINAL_508_SECURE.PDF
[11] Data provided by ICE Flight Monitor