

Contra Costa sheriff pledges ‘full investigation’ amidst troubling allegations from ICE detainees



Richmond city council member Melvin Willis, center, speaks to about 40 protestors during a rally at the Contra Costa County Sheriff’s office on Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2017, in Martinez, Calif. Community members protested the meeting of Sheriff David Livingston with Attorney General-designate Jeff Sessions, and a proposed new jail for the county. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

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RICHMOND — Following reports and an open letter from 40 federal immigration detainees alleging abuse and civil rights violations in the West County Detention Center, the county Sheriff’s office has pledged to conduct a full investigation, while also implying that the reports of abuses were a stretch.

In a statement released on Facebook Friday morning, the office of Sheriff David Livingston also firmly denied [reports](#) in the San Francisco Chronicle that said ICE detainees complained that they were being confined to their cells 23 hours a day, and prevented from using the restroom for hours on end. “Needless to say, the (media reports) are negative towards the Office of the Sheriff and misleading.” “Still, we do take the ICE detainees’ claims and allegations seriously and have launched a full investigation,” the statement reads.

The Sheriff's office response comes a day after a group called Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) released a [handwritten letter](#) signed by 40 immigration detainees at the detention facility in North Richmond, which included a list of misconduct accusations. Among them, that some female immigration detainees were forced to defecate in plastic bags when deputies refused to open their cell door for a restroom break during a lengthy lockdown period.

"They (deputies) yell at us like we are kids (They treat us like cockroaches, only the immigrants)... They lock for count and if we have to use the bathroom they don't unlock the door, but sometimes they open to county inmates, not ICE," the letter's author, Nancy Mayer, wrote. She later added, "All this makes me sick. I'm seeing a psychiatrist. I have nightmares. I feel pursued by them (deputies)."

Their accounts prompted calls for an investigation from State Senator Nancy Skinner (D-Berkeley), who wrote an open letter to the state attorney general calling for an independent investigation.

"This is not the first time that serious concerns have been raised regarding the treatment of people being detained... In fact, last May, my budget subcommittee held a hearing, which you attended, where we expressed concerns about conditions within these facilities and the treatment of people living in them," Skinner wrote.

The Sheriff's office runs the county jail system, which includes adult detention facilities in Martinez, Marsh Creek, and Richmond. The federal government pays the sheriff \$6 million per year to house immigration detainees in the 26-year-old Richmond jail, which has the capacity to hold around 300 inmates, [according to a 2016 federal inspection report](#).

The Facebook post firmly denied that federal detainees were housed for 23 hours a day, and said inmates are given keys to their cells and "free to leave their rooms to use the restrooms, go to programs, medical appointment or visits."

"A review of the video in the building shows the amount of free time all inmates receive, an amount which is in excess of that required by statute. The video also shows the rooms are unlocked for most of the day," the statement says. "Even when inmates should be in their rooms, their room doors are unlocked and they are free to leave to use the restroom as necessary."

When inmates are locked down — during head counts, for instance — the time they're confined to their cells is "minimal," the statement says. Sheriff spokesman Jimmy Lee said the agency wouldn't be releasing the video footage referenced in the statement.

Sheriff David Livingston was the target of [several protests](#) this year aimed at the county's relationship with the U.S. Marshal's Office regarding immigration detainees. He was also accused of failing to comply with the 2014 Trust Act, which limits the access local law

enforcement can provide to federal immigration enforcement officers. Livingston has said his office fully complies with the act.

This controversy comes on the heels of two hunger strikes by inmates over what they said were [inhumane conditions](#) in Santa Clara County and Alameda County jails. Earlier this year, four Alameda deputies were arrested and charged with abusing inmates, after an investigation prompted by an inmate's allegations and open letters to the public.

Contra Costa jails have also been the subject of past mistreatment allegations. In 2016, ICE [settled a lawsuit](#) with the ACLU that alleged federal detainees in Richmond weren't being given sufficient confidential phone time with their attorneys, and other due process violations. Last year, after five Contra Costa inmates committed suicide within a 12-month period, senior public defenders called for "acute change" and said the jail lacked sufficient resources to care for the mentally ill.

Sheriff's office officials [cited jail infrastructure concerns](#) when they successfully lobbied for a \$95 million West Contra Costa jail expansion that was approved this year despite strong opposition from the cities of Richmond, San Pablo and El Cerrito, as well as County Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond, and a host of community activists.

State Attorney General Xavier Becerra released a brief statement this week expressing concern over the allegations. The newly-appointed county district attorney, former judge Diana Becton, did not immediately return requests for comment.