MPR News | Minnesota Now Lawyers, advocates working with Minnesotans detained during the surge convene at fall forum 01M6PG6V8B8BTDN4VT96TZNYWV

NINA MOINI: The most recent data shows that more than 2,300 non-citizens who were arrested in Minnesota during the federal immigration enforcement operation this past winter were deported or left the country. 2,300 non-citizens. That's according to the Deportation Data Project. And immigration lawyers and advocates are still working with people who have been deported or are in ICE custody, and they're navigating the complex legal system that comes with it.

That's the focus of the University of Minnesota Law School forum happening tomorrow.

Joining me now is Sarah Brenes, Executive Director of the Binger Center for new Americans at the U of M. She's also an immigration attorney. Thanks for being with us, Sarah.

SARAH BRENES: Of course. Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: So this fall immigration forum, I understand it happens annually. This year's topic is "Defending Dignity in an Era of Mass Deportation and Immigration Detention." There's a lot in that title. Tell me why you decided to focus on this theme.

SARAH BRENES: So really, this has been the theme of our center's work for this year. The Binger Center has been part of the University of Minnesota Law School for over 10 years now, and has several different programs, including several clinics, where we're training law students who are representing individuals in immigration cases. And we also have an education outreach program. So this annual event is something that we do every year and really is intended to bring together national experts and local leaders to talk about the most pressing issues related to immigration law that's impacting Minnesota.

And it seemed an obvious topic, given what we've experienced in the last year and what we continue to experience with the new facility that's opening in Appleton, and just the massive detention and deportation of our neighbors. And so we took the opportunity to really focus the forum on some of those most pressing issues in this moment and continue to prepare our community and understand how the laws are impacting us.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, let's zoom in for a moment and talk about one of those topics you mentioned, this ICE detention center in the small western Minnesota city of Appleton, that's set to open this fall, so potentially soon, heading into winter almost, now. How is the legal community preparing for the opening of this detention center?

SARAH BRENES: That's a great question. And I think there's a lot of open questions in terms of when the facility is opening, how quickly they're going to be filling beds, whether they're going to be detaining primarily people from Minnesota or transporting people in from other parts of the country. And I think all of those scenarios are on the table. And legal services providers who provide pro bono services are collaborating and coordinating to figure out how to reach people, and tapping into our really robust private immigration bar to assist.

I think the reality, and we just came out with a report of, the fact that there are not many attorneys in general that are very close at all to where this facility is, is a huge concern in terms of really providing appropriate access to legal counsel for the number of people they plan to hold at the facility. So there are a lot of conversations to prepare for all of the different scenarios that might happen, while at the same time maintaining robust services for existing clients that people already have and are providing assistance to right now.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, we're talking a few hours West of the Twin Cities, and we don't have a lot of information. We've heard it will be a 1,600-bed facility, if that gives any idea of scale or size. Why is it helpful to bring people together in a forum like this? I'm assuming, people are trading information all the time and know where other folks are at. Are you bringing people in from other states, as well? Is it a matter of just being in the same room to, perhaps, think of strategies or ideas? Why is this forum-- why is it going to be helpful this year?

SARAH BRENES: I think it's all of the above, sometimes. I think that there's certainly a lot of conversations that people are having within our offices, within our networks, a lot of news that we're trying to keep up with. And really, I think, there's also an important part of our role as a university to provide access to information to the broader community. I mean, we are in an academic institution, in a law school, but really, part of the goal of the event is to make this information accessible to our community.

As you've noted on your program, as we saw this week, Minnesotans really got out to vote about the laws that are impacting our communities. And this is another way that we really leverage our connections as an academic institution, as attorneys, to knowledge that we have about the laws, and engage with people that are working in advocacy, working in journalism, working with our community members to make that information-- create that space so there can be more dialogue to talk about ways and strategies to make sure that Minnesota and the country has welcoming laws related to immigration, and really are as informed as possible to advocate for themselves and advocate for their community members and their clients.

NINA MOINI: And when you're talking about deportation specifically and dignity in deportation, we know thousands of people were deported or self-deported, but we don't hear a lot of the stories of what happens after that. Sometimes, it's harder to get a sense for what that work is looking like. Obviously, if the person is out of the country, as well. What do you want people to about that work, in particular, of the folks who have been deported or self-reported and what happens after?

SARAH BRENES: Yeah, that's a really great question. And something as we were planning the forum, for those of us who are attorneys and we're advocating for what our clients' goals are within the law, and I think one of the really challenging parts of this moment that we're in, just given the number of people who are detained, the speed that their cases are being processed, and the limited options that people have to remain in the United States, that those conversations are real, and something that we really wanted to make sure there was space for, and acknowledging that not every person is going to have the ability to stay in the United States. And so really understanding who's working on the ground in other countries.

There have been a growing number of groups that are working with people who are being returned to their countries of origin or being sent to third countries, and to understand and demystify to what we know about that process and understand what remedies people might have, because they may be removed now, but there might be a path for them to return in the future, or being connected to resources.

I think, in a lot of cases, when we're working with people that are navigating the immigration system, a lot of times the goal is to try to create a path or at least, have some autonomy to make choices about whether some will stay in the United States or leave. And so really trying to preserve the dignity and that process and try to help people have as many choices as possible, whether they're staying here or leaving and really understanding what happens in that process, demystify. In a similar way that people were out on the streets with whistles and phones and not letting people be taken in darkness, the same, we would like to be true, if people are removed so that we have information about what's happening, can advocate appropriately, and to preserve dignity of everyone who's going through the deportation process.

NINA MOINI: "Defending Dignity in an Era of Mass Deportation and Immigration Detention." Sarah, thank you for coming by the program and telling us about this forum. We appreciate your time.

SARAH BRENES: Thanks so much.

NINA MOINI: Sarah Brenes is the Executive Director of the Binger Center for new Americans at the U of M.