

NINA MOINI: Scenes unfolding at an immigration detention center in Newark, New Jersey have some drawing parallels to events that unfolded, here in Minnesota this winter, during the surge of federal immigration agents. On May 22, hundreds of immigrant men inside Delaney Hall detention center began what advocates are calling a hunger and labor strike. Protests outside the facility have also taken place in support.

These demonstrations have, at times, escalated into clashes between federal agents and protesters. Arya Sundaram has been reporting on the situation at the Delaney Hall ICE detention center for *Gothamist* and WNYC. And she joins me now to share more of her reporting with us. Thank you for being here, Arya.

ARYA Thanks for having me.

SUNDARAM:

NINA MOINI: We were curious to know what a reporter on the ground there in the area of Delaney Hall was seeing and experiencing. You may know a little bit about what unfolded here in Minnesota at the beginning of the year. And many people are still processing that and the ripple effects from it.

So we appreciate having a perspective on what else is going on across the country. So we really appreciate your time. My understanding is that this hunger strike or labor strike does continue in that it's in about its third week. Can you tell us a little bit about what the scene is like now at Delaney Hall?

ARYA This hunger and labor strike began as a protest of the conditions inside of the facility. Detainees inside are saying
SUNDARAM: that the water tastes terrible, that there's worms in the food, that there's medical neglect and issues inside the facility, preventing people from getting the care that they need.

And they really are demanding their freedom, among other things, especially for those who are elderly, particularly young, medically vulnerable. And outside the facility, like you said, there have been a number of protests. There's been a kind of around the clock vigil that advocates and protesters have set up for the men and women inside.

And really, what's been happening, as well as these protests have grown in number, a number of violent clashes between protesters and law enforcement, which initially started with ICE enforcement who were out there. But then it changed over to the New Jersey State Police and Newark Police later on as the protests went on.

NINA MOINI: Can I ask you about that? Because here in Minnesota, a lot of people wondered and really continue to wonder about the relationship between federal, and local, and state law enforcement agencies. Some people felt that there was cooperation going on, that shouldn't have been going on. And people entered into different agreements, I know, in other parts of the country. But what's your understanding of how that relationship is working and also how it may be perceived?

ARYA So initially when the protests started happening, it was ICE that was outside of the facility, managing the protests
SUNDARAM: at times, using force, using pepper spray, using batons at times. And then the New Jersey Governor Mikie Sherrill decided that she was going to step in and have the New Jersey State Police take over, at least the kind of protest and enforcement protest, kind of management aspect, of this situation.

And the way that she put it was that she didn't want there to be a pretext for more ICE enforcement in the area. And she actually even referred to other ICE surges in other places across the country, even including in Minnesota, as reason for why she wanted to have the New Jersey State Police actually step in and take over some of the protest management part of this.

But at the same time, protesters and advocates on the ground really saw this in a negative light as New Jersey State Police kind of taking over for ICE, and doing the work of the federal government here in some ways, and using force, as well, in ways that protesters really, really decried.

And then, now, of course, we've moved over to the Newark Police Department. There's been kind of de-escalation, from what I'm hearing, from protesters on the ground in terms of less violent clashes. But it's still a very present thing, insofar as there are a number of protesters that continue to go back day after day to Delaney Hall. And there continue to be arrests rest at this moment.

NINA MOINI: It's this balance a lot of agencies are grappling with-- with, what is the difference between containing a crowd or helping a protester remain safe and in cooperating with these federal agencies? It's interesting to see that unfolding in other places. You did mention the governor of your state being able to access Delaney Hall, here in Minnesota.

Some of our members of Congress had problems getting into different areas of different facilities, both here and in other states. What has been your understanding of the experience there in terms of transparency for public officials on what is happening inside?

ARYA SUNDARAM: So a number of congressional officials, the New Jersey governor, and others had tried during the height of these protests to enter the facility. And some were denied entry, even though congressional officials have, in federal law, an oversight ability to be able to inspect these facilities.

And that really caused a public outcry and a concern that there was a lack of transparency, a lack of knowledge of what was actually happening inside of these facilities. Because even at that time, some detainees didn't even have access to tablets and phones to call their loved ones and others outside of the facility.

Eventually, my understanding is that it's now not as much of an issue for Congress members to actually enter the facilities. So Congressman Menendez, Senator Andy Kim have been able to enter the facilities and talk with detainees. Governor Mikie Sherrill was recently granted entry to inspect the facilities.

However, she said that it was a very limited tour of the facility. She wasn't able to speak with detainees, which she said continues to raise concerns about what's actually happening inside and some of the conditions inside. And the state of New Jersey has filed a lawsuit, actually, against the GEO Group, which is the private contractor that runs the facility, in order to conduct a full health inspection of the facility, which they say they were unable to do.

NINA MOINI: What about DHS? What has been the response from them, if any, related to this situation? As a reporter, are you able to verify information? And what ways are you having to verify information?

ARYA SUNDARAM: Sure. Well, I mean, to this day, DHS has said that there has been no hunger strike inside the facility. Although, my understanding from talking to advocates outside the facility who are connected with people inside the facility- - that the hunger strike is no longer happening. The labor strike continues.

However, they did say directly that many detainees were participating in a hunger strike, at least for several days. And so it's tough when a federal agency is denying what several sources have said on the ground and know, at times, has espoused incorrect information on a public level.

And so my job as a reporter is to just continue to fact check what's going on, as much as possible, to try to talk with people on the inside and the outside about the conditions inside the facility. But it's certainly been a challenge, especially as they've tightened visitation hours. It's been difficult for detainees to access, like I said, their tablets and phones at times during this strike and the protests outside. And the difficulties remain for people outside the facilities actually getting access to people inside.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, thank you for that, Aria. It's important to talk about what's going on at these facilities, and in different states, and in different areas. But as you probably heard about Minnesota, it's hard for us to know how other people perceived what happened in Minnesota, right?

But as a reporter, I'm sure you heard about what was going on in the neighborhoods, just in people's neighborhoods, specifically, really, of the Twin Cities area here, but in other parts of the state as well, with people showing up to be constitutional observers, people blowing whistles to activate networks to come out and try to, in their view, protect their neighbors. What's going on and in your area? What are you seeing in terms of just general community response as you back away from the detention center area?

ARYA
SUNDARAM: Absolutely. Well, in New York, there have been a number of rapid response groups that have cropped up, actually, in part, inspired by some of the neighborhood organizing that happened in Minnesota. I talked to people who have joined what are called Ice Watch groups, where they will have a neighborhood patrol to keep an eye on ICE enforcement in their area.

And some of the people that I talked to, specifically, say, I saw what happened in Minneapolis. I saw what happened in Minnesota. And I wanted to rise to the occasion in the way that I saw people there were doing. And I think this kind of outpouring of support and outpouring of resistance has kind of helped supercharge a kind of national movement in terms of what's going on. I mean, even, we saw it with some of our legislators and state officials change their tune on legislation regarding ICE enforcement after what we saw happened in the Twin Cities.

NINA MOINI: That's so interesting to hear. Thank you so much for sharing your perspective and your reporting with us, Aria. We really appreciate your time.

ARYA
SUNDARAM: Thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: Aria Sundaram is a reporter for *Gothamist* and WNYC.