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NEWS

After ICE detainees in Pa. went on a hunger strike, officials put them in solitary confinement

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Protesters gather outside the office of U.S. Senator John Fetterman in Harrisburg. January 27, 2026. Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com



Multiple detainees at Pennsylvania's largest ICE detention facility have been put in solitary confinement since the start of a hunger strike late last week, fueling concerns about retaliation against people trying to make the conditions of their confinement more humane.

Within the last week, staff at Moshannon Valley Processing Center in Clearfield County have taken tablets away and blocked electronic messages from coming into specific detainees and placed five detainees, including a man who spoke to PennLive, in "the hole" or solitary confinement.

PennLive's reporting of the hunger strike reached U.S. Rep. Summer Lee, who represents Pennsylvania's 12th District, and she called for the closure of Moshannon.

"Reports of a hunger strike over terrible conditions, of detainees becoming sick because of the food, and of detainees being placed in solitary confinement after speaking out only confirm that without real oversight, abuse and neglect will continue," Lee said in an email to PennLive.

Lee was denied entry into Moshannon last fall despite federal law allowing members of congress to inspect facilities without notification.

An Ecuadorian detainee told PennLive Monday that Moshannon staff is trying to deprive them of freedom of expression, a fundamental human right.

"They try to suppress us despite us trying to express ourselves in a non-violent and calm manner," he said.

He asked to remain anonymous in fear of retaliation. He said staff have launched an inspection to find who is "leading" the hunger strike and "speaking out" about conditions there.

He said three men from the Dominican Republic were taken into solitary confinement for a week after staff believed they organized the hunger strike.

A lawyer for one of those men confirmed his client was put in solitary confinement at the beginning of the hunger strike.

According to the Ecuadorian man, the three men were interrogated about another detainee and his involvement in the hunger strike and his conversations with PennLive.

“We are not obligated by anyone to do this. This hunger strike is a call of desperation because we are not being listened to,” he said.

The man moved to the U.S. in 2023 to escape gang violence and was granted asylum when he arrived. He was detained after attending a court hearing and taken to Moshannon in December.

He said when he arrived at Moshannon, ICE agents taunted him. He felt that guards took joy in the fear that he and other detainees were facing.

“They made fun of our suffering and made fun of the fact that we entered the country under the Biden administration,” he said.

According to multiple detainees, “the hole” is an isolated cell with no bed, no outside communication with others, and no recreation.

Clearfield County Commissioner John Sobel said an officials from the GEO Group, the private contractor that operates Moshannon, told him there was not a hunger strike, although men were put in solitary confinement for trying to start one. He said he was told that men refused their meal on Thursday evening after another detainee got sick but accepted their meals beginning Friday morning.

Commissioner David Glass echoed much of what Sobel said about the hunger strike and retaliation.

Glass opposes renewing the contract with GEO Group in September. He said he brought this incident up to other commissioners as a prime example of why the county should not be involved with the federal government and ICE.

ICE contracts with Clearfield County to hold people for them. Clearfield County then has a contract with GEO Group to operate Moshannon.

“I’m not supportive of what ICE has been doing, specifically over the last 18 months or so,” Glass told PennLive. “I just want out of this.”

Craig Shagin, an immigration lawyer of multiple detainees within Moshannon, said one of his clients is now in solitary confinement for speaking to PennLive about the conditions of the facility.

“The system is set up to harm the inmates– not by sharp, immediate, absolute terms, but by slow dwindling services and neglect,” Shagin said. “I can think of no greater threat to your liberty than to give a financial incentive to a private corporation to take it away.”

He said many of his clients reported severe medical negligence, inadequate food, and an overall lack of hygiene. Additionally, he said he believes GEO Group is intentionally placing clients in detention facilities far away from their lawyers, “isolating” their clients.

“I fear for all of my clients who are detained,” Shagin said.

Shagin’s concerns go beyond facility conditions. Shagin said the secluded and highly restrictive facility prevents random inspections from politicians or local officials.

He accused GEO of prioritizing “making money for their stakeholders” instead of upholding the “responsibility” they have over the detainees’ lives.

“They are not demonstrating the kind of care that any institution should give to inmates, whether it’s a mental hospital, a prison,” Shagin said. “You have to take care of the people you’ve taken into custody.”

Another detainee who participated in the hunger strike, Vladimir Rymarenko, said he was denied proper medication for his anxiety and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Additionally, he said he did not receive his prescription glasses for four and a half months.

Rymarenko was born in the Soviet Union and moved to the US when he was 8. He now has a deportation order to Russia.

He has lived in Lancaster almost his entire life, and was taken into Moshannon Sept. 27, 2025 for missing a court hearing.

During his seven months at Moshannon, he has had four teeth removed instead of receiving dental care, he said.

Rymarenko said the treatment is much better for those who speak English. He said he agrees that medical treatment needs to improve, which is why he joined the hunger strike.

“For non-speaking English people, it’s very hard for them,” Rymarenko said. “A lot of the staff just ignore them.”

In Frederick, Maryland, the wife of detainee Marvin Morales remains worried about the conditions in which her husband is living at Moshannon.

Lyesenia Cruz married Morales in 2018, both originally from El Salvador. Her husband was detained a month ago after being pulled over by ICE agents while he was driving to work.

“He told me they threw him to the ground, and an agent put a foot on his head,” Cruz said.

She and her husband said he was not given a reason as to why he was detained and cannot afford to pay for a lawyer. Since his detainment, Cruz said she struggles to pay their rent and keep up their financial responsibilities.

“My husband is a good person,” Cruz said. “His absence weighs on me deeply; I miss him very much.”

In emails to PennLive, both GEO Group and ICE denied there was a hunger strike and denied all claims that detainees made about poor food and medical negligence.

“This is the best healthcare that many aliens have received in their entire lives,” a DHS spokesperson said. “Being in detention is a choice.”

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