

Presentation on Medical Care and Deaths in ICE Custody

Testimony by June Everett

For a hearing on "Detention and Removal: Immigration Detainee Medical Care" before the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law

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I would like to thank Congresswoman Lofgren and all of the members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to speak today.

My name is June Everett and my sister is Sandra Marina Kenley. To find out after reading the papers recently that more than 62 immigrants have died and continue to die while in U.S. custody since about the time of my sister's death is shocking and disheartening. My sister was one of those immigrants who died in jail under ICE supervision.

I cannot tell you the stories of all these other deceased immigrants, but I can tell you my sister's story. We grew up in Barbados. My sister was the eldest of four children. Sandie raised my siblings and me when our mother was at work. At the age of 15, she graduated with honors from high school and began teaching Spanish—English is our native language. My whole family grew up with hopes and dreams of coming to America to better our lives. We met many tourists in Barbados who painted a picture of a country that was fair and just. My sister died holding onto these beliefs and dreams.

Sandie came to America when she was 20 years old, and lived here for nearly 33 years as a legal immigrant.

In 2005, she visited Barbados to show off her granddaughter, over whom she had custody. When she returned to this country, she was stopped by an ICE officer at the Miami airport and asked to report to the immigration office at Dulles airport to answer questions. She did that, but they gave her a date to return and told her not to bring her granddaughter. When she returned a few weeks later she again brought her granddaughter—she was the child's sole custodian. The officers again sent her away told her to return without her granddaughter. About one month went by and she again reported to the authorities for

questioning, as requested. This was the third time she went out to Dulles airport to speak with the officers to answer their questions. This time, she did not return.

Her son and I were with her the day she was taken into custody. She was detained for old misdemeanor drug charges for which she was not required to serve any jail time. When she was detained, she had already fulfilled the court's requirements for those charges. She completed her probation early and never went back on drugs. At the end of the interview, when the ICE officer asked her if she had anything to add, my sister said: "I would like to say that I realized that I had a drug problem and I prayed to the Lord to get over it. And he helped me to get over it. . . . I have been drug free for three or four years. I turned my life around and I am trying to raise my first granddaughter. I am trying to do positive things with my life."

At the airport we told the ICE officer of my sister's medical condition. She was disabled. She had a bleeding fibroid and needed surgery. She had high blood pressure and high cholesterol and took medication for those conditions. Despite all this, ICE determined that she needed to be detained. Sandie wasn't a threat to anyone and she was not a flight risk—she had her whole life and family in this country and had just showed up for questioning three times. That day, ICE became her judge and jury for the same crime she had put behind her.

Sandie was taken to the Pamunkey Regional Jail in Virginia. I know she complained constantly about not getting her medicine. When the prison officers finally gave her pills after many weeks, they were the wrong ones, not the ones we had given the ICE official that day at Dulles airport. Those pills made Sandie very sick. My sister didn't want me to cause waves, because she said that if you speak out, "They send you far, far away where no one can reach you or find you."

I did everything I could to save my sister's life. Advocates called the jail on her behalf, while I searched for lawyers to help. I even went back to Dulles to try to find the ICE officials to beg them to get my sister the care she needed or to release her, since she was no threat to anyone.

Even though she was afraid of retaliation, my sister did everything she could to get help also. She was hemorrhaging non-stop. Blood poured down her legs and spilled on the floor

of her cell. My sister was scared and suffering unnecessarily. But no one would do anything.

She was looking forward to her 53rd birthday. She could not wait to celebrate with me the next year, when I would turn 50. We made big plans, but they never happened. Instead, I got a call on December 18, 2005, saying my sister had died in jail.

Sandie's death certificate says she died of acute coronary insufficiency/hypertensive cardiovascular disease, but there is so much conflicting information. I have so many questions that have not been answered and ICE has made it so very difficult for me to learn what happened. There needs to be some accountability, some transparency, and some oversight.

I buried my sister Sandie here in America, on January 4th, 2006. So, she is still here in this country, but dead. What sense does this make? When she could still be here, alive, had she been given the chance to fulfill her American dream? What good has this done for our country or anyone? Instead, it has brought shame and disgrace to a country that is supposed to stand up for human rights.

My sister was not illegal. She was not a terrorist. She was a human being. One that made mistakes like all of us. She was human enough to turn her life around and to pursue her dreams. She became a nurse, had just bought a new car, and took custody over her granddaughter. My sister worked in this country for at least 25 years before becoming disabled.

Sandie died trying to do the right thing. She died because the American system failed her. A system we believed in. A system that needs fixing now, before more lives are lost unnecessarily.

What am I supposed to tell Sandra's granddaughter, Nakita, about her grandmother's death? What am I supposed to tell Nakita about American principles? How many more lives have to be shattered before the system is fixed?

Thank you for listening to my sister's story today. I am here because I believe that what happened to her ought not happen to anyone else. Already we are too late for some.

I urge you to ask tough questions about my sister's treatment, and about all those other innocent people that have seen their health deteriorate, or have died awaiting a judge's decision or deportation.

I thank you for your time.