May 3, 2021

Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street SW
Washington, DC 20528

Tae D. Johnson
Acting Director
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
500 12th Street SW
Washington, DC 20536

Troy Miller
Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Commissioner
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20229

David S. Ferriero
Archivist of the United States
700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20408

Tyler Moran
Special Assistant to the President for Immigration
Domestic Policy Council
Eisenhower Executive Office Building
Room 469
1650 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20502

Re: Request for Withdrawal and Reevaluation of DHS Records Schedules Authorizing Destruction of Records of Abuse, Neglect, and Misconduct

Dear Messrs. Mayorkas, Johnson, Miller, and Ferriero, and Ms. Moran:

Since 2017, the National Archives and Records Administration (“NARA”) has approved three records disposition schedules authorizing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) to destroy records documenting abuse, neglect, misconduct, and civil rights violations of people in ICE detention. NARA is also currently considering a proposed records disposition schedule covering similar records of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (“CBP”).

The undersigned organizations—a diverse coalition of more than 80 immigrant and civil rights advocates, government watchdogs, historians, media organizations, archivists, and researchers—write to urge the Biden administration and NARA to immediately withdraw and reevaluate each of these records disposition schedules for two reasons. First, a recent ruling by a federal judge calls into question the government’s overall approach to appraising the archival value of records reflecting abuse and neglect in the U.S. immigration system. Second, since the records at issue were initially appraised, several alarming reports of ICE and CBP abuse have come to light, particularly following the outbreak of COVID-19. These recent developments provide ample reason for the government to comprehensively reappraise the records at issue to determine whether they “have sufficient administrative, legal, research, or other value to warrant
their continued preservation by the Government.”

As 27 members of Congress recently wrote in a letter to DHS and NARA, these events have only confirmed that “records documenting serious abuse, neglect, and misconduct in our immigration system should be preserved, not destroyed.”

Secretary Mayorkas has often stressed his commitment to making DHS “open, transparent, and accountable.” We are calling on the Biden administration to follow through on this commitment by ensuring that critical documentary evidence is not erased from history.

I. Background

A. The ICE and CBP Records Schedules At Issue

DHS and its components ICE and CBP were established in 2003, and have since obtained NARA’s approval of disposition schedules covering a variety of agency records. Among them are three disposition schedules authorizing ICE to destroy records documenting abuse, neglect, misconduct, and civil rights violations of people in ICE detention:


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1 44 U.S.C. § 3303a(a); see Appraisal Policy of the National Archives § 10, Sept. 2007, [https://bit.ly/390upse](https://bit.ly/390upse) (“NARA will reappraise records when there is compelling evidence that earlier appraisal decisions require review.”).


In addition to these approved ICE schedules, NARA is also currently considering the following proposed CBP records schedule:


Numerous organizations, including many of the undersigned, submitted public comments opposing the proposed CBP records schedule.6

### B. Recent Legal and Factual Developments

1. **The CREW v. NARA Decision**

On March 12, 2021, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia vacated in part NARA’s approval of ICE’s “Detainee Records” disposition schedule, holding that “as to the Sexual Abuse and Assault Files, ERO Death Review Files, Detainee Segregation Case Files, Detention Monitoring Reports, and DRIL Records, NARA’s approval of the Disposition Schedule was arbitrary and capricious because it failed to consider an important factor—the research value of the records—and failed to adequately respond to comments pointing out that it had failed to consider that factor.”7

The CREW decision provides an in-depth analysis of NARA’s obligations under the disposal provisions of the Federal Records Act, NARA’s Appraisal Policy, and the Administrative Procedure Act. The court explained that “NARA was required by both the governing statutes and the agency’s Appraisal Policy to consider the research value of the records in ICE’s Disposition Schedule,” but “failed to meaningfully do so.”8 Specifically, the administrative record did “not reveal that NARA considered current research use or made inferences about the anticipated use of the documents in future research,” even though these considerations are “at the forefront of the Appraisal Policy.”9 “Rather than grapple with” commenters’ “significant points” regarding the ICE records’ research value, “NARA summarily answered that the records’ ‘anticipated research use will be more contemporary rather than many years into the future,’” without providing any “insight into how the agency determined that the records had contemporary rather than long-term research value.”10

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8 Id.

9 Id.

10 Id.
The CREW court also noted “two additional considerations that motivate[d] its decision.” First, NARA itself has recognized that it “previously underestimated the research value of important immigration records” of ICE’s predecessor agency, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, archived in NARA’s “Record Group 85.” In particular, a 2018 NARA report lamented that many of these records were destroyed because they were erroneously “thought by some to have little or no future value fifty years ago,” even though they are “now considered priceless by historians, social scientists, and genealogists.” The court explained that the “lessons of Record Group 85 provide all the more reason for NARA to carefully consider the future research value of the records listed in ICE’s Disposition Schedule.” Second, insofar as NARA justified temporary retention of certain records “on the basis that information contained in those records is ‘[c]aptured elsewhere’ in long-term temporary or permanent records,” the court explained that NARA needed to “weigh the research value of any information that is preserved in primary sources but is not captured by secondary summaries or other documents that are permanently preserved.”

2. Recent Reports of ICE and CBP Abuse, Neglect, and Misconduct

Since NARA approved the latest of the records schedules at issue here in March 2020, several disturbing reports of ICE and CBP abuse, neglect, and misconduct have come to light—particularly following the outbreak of COVID-19.

A February 2021 report found that ICE detention centers have had “some of the worst [COVID-19] outbreaks in the country,” and that “clear inaction by ICE and its (for-profit) subcontractors has allowed the virus to run rampant.” ICE has “withheld protective equipment; transferred detainees needlessly between facilities; ignored detainees’ medical needs; and physically and mentally abused detainees with fists, pepper spray, and solitary confinement for seeking medical care.” The agency has adopted policies that “significantly differ” from those established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”), drawing sharp criticism from public health experts. ICE has also come under scrutiny for failing to notify health officials and nonprofits when individuals have tested positive for COVID-19 and been released from facilities. As of March 12, 2021, ICE still had no agencywide plan for providing

11 Id. at *9.
12 Id.
13 Id.
14 Id.
15 Id. (emphasis added).
17 Id.
18 Id.
COVID-19 vaccines to detained people, nor could it say how many detained people had been vaccinated. And on March 30, 2021, the DHS OIG issued a report identifying widespread mistreatment of immigrants detained at La Palma Correctional Center in Arizona, ranging from inadequate medical care to excessive punishment for peacefully protesting lax COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

Alarming revelations of abuse at particular ICE detention facilities have also emerged in the past year. A September 2020 whistleblower complaint provided a horrific account of a doctor performing invasive gynecological procedures on detained women without their consent at an ICE detention center in Georgia. The whistleblower further alleged “jarring medical neglect” at the facility, including “refusal to test detained immigrants for COVID-19 who have been exposed to the virus and are symptomatic, shredding of medical requests submitted by detained immigrants, and fabricating medical records.” 173 members of Congress called for an OIG investigation of the whistleblower’s claims, noting that they hearken back to the “shameful history of sterilization in the United States, in particular sterilization of people of color and incarcerated people.” Separately, an August 2020 complaint claimed that guards at an ICE detention center in Texas “sexually assaulted and harassed inmates in a ‘pattern and practice’ of abuse.” And an October 2020 complaint described alarming reports that officials at an ICE detention center in Mississippi violently coerced detained immigrants into signing their own deportation documents, including through the use of “physical abuse and pepper spray.”

CBP’s response to the pandemic also has been extremely troubling. In response to a CDC order suspending the introduction of certain people from “Coronavirus Impacted Areas,” CBP began “expelling” individuals arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border from the United States on March 20, 2021, without giving them the opportunity to apply for asylum. In addition to turning away asylum seekers, CBP used this order to turn away and expel nearly 13,000

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21 Maria Sacchetti, *ICE has no clear plan for vaccinating thousands of detained immigrants fighting deportation*, *Washington Post*, Mar. 12, 2021, [https://wapo.st/3tLBAwE](https://wapo.st/3tLBAwE).
24 Id.
27 Letter from Southern Poverty Law Center and Freedom For Immigrants to ICE and DHS, Oct. 7, 2020, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a33042eb078691c386e7bee/t/5f7f17f39e044f47175204fb/1602164723244/Re+CRCL+Complaint+ICE%27s+Use+of+Torture+to+Coerce+Immigrants+to+Sign+Immigration+Documents+at+Adams+County+Correctional+Facility.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a33042eb078691c386e7bee/t/5f7f17f39e044f47175204fb/1602164723244/Re+CRCL+Complaint+ICE%27s+Use+of+Torture+to+Coerce+Immigrants+to+Sign+Immigration+Documents+at+Adams+County+Correctional+Facility.pdf).
unaccompanied children, despite provisions of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act that require the government to protect children who arrive at the border without a parent or legal guardian.

CBP has been widely criticized in the past year for its abusive and unlawful conduct at the southern border, including by DHS oversight bodies. In January of this year, the DHS OIG published a scathing review of two programs designed to expeditiously process asylum seekers at the border. DHS did not concur with five out of six recommendations from the Inspector General, including one that objected to the programs’ prolonged detention of individuals in violation of CBP’s own detention standards. In 2020, multiple accounts were submitted to DHS documenting horrific mistreatment of detained pregnant individuals in CBP custody. The treatment of pregnant individuals in these cases illustrate violations of CBP’s own policies and standards regarding this vulnerable population, including detaining pregnant individuals in “short-term” facilities far longer than the 72-hour limit memorialized in CBP policy. These facilities usually lack beds, showers, or full-time medical care staff, making them woefully inadequate to hold pregnant people and putting them at risk for adverse health outcomes, including miscarriages.

A Freedom of Information Act request uncovered a DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (“CRCL”) spreadsheet documenting 42 cases with allegations that CBP mistreated pregnant individuals. The document includes accounts of pregnant persons subjected to CBP harassment such as verbal abuse, denial or significant delay in medical care, family separation, and CBP misconduct during searches. The allegations arose in multiple settings, including but not limited to detention. The most recent supplement to these complaints is an account of a pregnant woman held in DHS custody for 10 days in September 2020 who suffered inhumane conditions, was denied her prenatal vitamins, and was traumatically separated from her husband.

33 Id.
34 Letter from ACLU Foundation of San Diego & Imperial Counties and ACLU Border Rights Center to DHS OIG, Oct. 30, 2020, at 122-32, https://bit.ly/3uW1VZg (the second addendum to a January 2020 complaint regarding CBP mistreatment of detained pregnant people. The March 2020 and October 2020 addenda respectively detail 42 cases known to DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and the account of Ms. Doe, a pregnant person separated from her husband and subjected to harsh conditions in CBP custody).
37 Id. at 89.
38 Id.
39 ACLU, supra note 36, at 123-25.
Within the past year, CBP vehicle pursuits have involved dangerous tactics that have resulted in death and serious injuries. In June 2020, a Border Patrol vehicle pursuit ended in a crash that killed seven people in El Paso, TX. The crash occurred in the same area as another fatal wreck in January 2020 following a Border Patrol chase. In July 2020, a Border Patrol agent ran over a migrant with a CBP vehicle while pursuing a group who was on foot. CBP has not made their vehicle pursuit policy publicly available, further hindering efforts to hold the agency and its personnel accountable.

CBP’s recent abuses have not been limited to the southern border. Last summer, CBP was mired in controversy after it deployed personnel to several U.S. cities to respond to racial justice protests. CBP agents from the specialized, militarized Border Patrol Tactical Unit were sent to Portland, Oregon, where they engaged in disturbing tactics such as “sweep[ing] people off the street into unmarked vehicles.” The Oregon Attorney General subsequently sued CBP and other federal agencies, alleging that they “engaged in unlawful law enforcement in violation of the civil rights of Oregonians by seizing and detaining them without probable cause.”

CBP also continues to flout internal oversight and reform efforts. The situation has grown so dire that CRCL staff went to the press in August 2020 to reveal that CBP was ignoring CRCL’s “concerns about the development of a new use-of-force policy,” including plans to use “chemical deterrents against people” at the border.

II. Request for Comprehensive Reappraisal of ICE and CBP Records Reflecting Abuse, Neglect, or Misconduct

Section 10 of NARA’s Appraisal Policy provides that “NARA will reappraise records when there is compelling evidence that earlier appraisal decisions require review. In such circumstances, NARA will seek Federal agency and public involvement in the reappraisal process.”

Here, the recent developments described above constitute “compelling evidence that earlier appraisal decisions require review.” In CREW v. NARA, the court identified deficiencies with how the government evaluated the archival value of records reflecting abuse, neglect, and

42 Kladzyk, supra note 42.
46 Julia Ainsley and Laura Strickler, DHS staffers say Trump appointees Wolf, Cuccinelli ignoring input on protests, immigration policy, NBC News, Aug. 7, 2020, https://nbcnews.to/3v1IoLR.
misconduct in our immigration system, and provided specific guidance on how NARA should conduct that analysis going forward. The court’s guidance is equally applicable to similar records of DHS components that were not addressed in CREW, but that may have comparable long-term value for legal, research, historical, or accountability purposes. The government should thus utilize the reappraisal process to apply CREW’s teachings in a comprehensive manner to all similar DHS component records, not just the ICE records at issue in that case.

Extensive overlap in the appraisal decisions at issue underscores the need for a comprehensive reappraisal effort. For instance, the NARA appraisal memorandum for the proposed CBP records schedule justified temporary retention based partly on the fact that “[s]imilar records” had previously been approved as temporary, including records covered by the ICE “Detainee Records” schedule invalidated in CREW.48 Insofar as NARA’s analysis of the CBP schedule relied on aspects of the ICE records schedule that were later invalidated, that reasoning must be reexamined. Similarly, the NARA appraiser recommended approving destruction of several categories of CBP records on the grounds that some unspecified information from those records is “[c]aptured elsewhere in permanent records.”49 As noted above, NARA provided similar reasoning for approving the ICE schedule addressed in CREW, and the court responded by instructing NARA on remand to specifically “weigh the research value of any information that is . . . not captured” in “other documents that are permanently preserved.”50 Here again, the court’s guidance is relevant not only to the records schedule at issue in CREW, but also to other similar records schedules of DHS components.

The recent reports of ICE and CBP abuse discussed above—all of which came to light after the government rendered the pertinent appraisal decisions—provide further grounds for reappraisal. To take just one example, the reports of rampant medical abuse and neglect at ICE facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic provide compelling grounds to reevaluate the short three-year retention period that NARA approved for ICE “Detainee Medical Complaint Records” in 2017.51 Such records are likely to shed light on how ICE responded (or failed to respond) to an unprecedented public health crisis and its impact on immigrants in ICE custody, and may therefore have considerable long-term “legal, research, or other value” that was not apparent when NARA approved temporary retention of the records in 2017.52

III. Conclusion

The Biden administration has repeatedly stressed its commitment to bringing accountability and transparency to DHS. In keeping with these statements, we urge DHS and NARA to immediately withdraw the ICE and CBP records schedules described above and to comprehensively reappraise the records at issue pursuant to Section 10 of NARA’s Appraisal Policy. Per that policy, we further implore NARA to “seek . . . public involvement in the

49 Id.
50 CREW, 2021 WL 950142, at *9 (emphasis added).
52 See 44 U.S.C. § 3303a(a).
reappraisal process.” Your prompt action is necessary to ensure that critical evidence of abuse and misconduct in our immigration system is not erased from history.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Respectfully submitted,

American Civil Liberties Union
American Friends Service Committee
American Historical Association
American Immigration Council
American Oversight
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York
Ascension Lutheran Church
Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project
BuzzFeed, Inc.
Center for Comparative Immigration Studies
Center for Constitutional Rights
Center for Inter-American and Border Studies, University of Texas at El Paso
Center for LGBTQ Economic Advancement & Research
Church World Service
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington
Civil Rights Education and Enforcement Center
Concerned Archivists Alliance
Defending Rights & Dissent
Deportation Research Clinic, Buffett Institute for Global Affairs, Northwestern University
Equality California
Fight for the Future
FORGE, Inc.
Free Government Information
Government Accountability Project
Government Information Watch
Human Rights Initiative of North Texas
Human Rights Watch
Immigrant Legal Resource Center
Immigration and Ethnic History Society
Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota
Institute for Immigration Research, George Mason University
Interfaith Coalition on Immigration MN
Interfaith Welcome Coalition
Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan
Just Detention International
Just Futures Law
Laredo Immigrant Alliance
League of Women Voters of the United States
Legal Aid Justice Center
Lyndale United Church of Christ
Migrant Center for Human Rights
Minnesota Interfaith Coalition on Immigration
MuckRock
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Coalition Against Censorship
National Freedom of Information Coalition
National Immigrant Justice Center
National Immigration Law Center
National Immigration Litigation Alliance
National Immigration Project
National LGBTQ Task Force
National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
National Security Archive
National Security Counselors
Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala
New Mexico Immigrant Law Center
NJ Work Environment Council
Open the Government
PFLAG National
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Project South
Protect Democracy
RAICES
RCHP-AHC Still Waters Anti-Trafficking Program
Reclaim Democracy!
Refugees International
Restore The Fourth
Sage Information Services
Sanctuary and Resistance to Injustice
Sanctuary DMV
Silver State Equality-Nevada
Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations
Society of Professional Journalists
Southern Border Communities Coalition
Transparency International - U.S. Office
UndocuBlack Network
UnLocal
Valley Community Presbyterian Church
Valley Community Presbyterian Church Immigration Task Force
Valley Community Presbyterian Church Mission Team
Valley Screen Printing
Whitman-Walker Institute
Woodhull Freedom Foundation