

Protecting Immigrants' Rights: Guidance for Places of Worship in Ohio

Note: This is not legal advice and does not substitute for consultation with an attorney.



On January 20, 2025, the Trump administration reversed a policy that protected certain areas—such as places of worship, schools, and health centers—from immigration enforcement. This means that immigration officials may now enter these formerly protected spaces to enforce immigration laws.

Although places of worship are not required to enforce immigration laws, there are still important requirements and restrictions to be aware of. This guidance provides information, FAQs, and recommendations for places of worship relating to immigration enforcement.

RELEVANT FEDERAL AND OHIO LAWS

Federal Law

The Fourth Amendment provides a constitutional right for all individuals to be free from illegal searches or seizures. The Fourth Amendment may limit immigration enforcement agents' activities at a place of worship. Whether or not an agent may search an area without a judicial warrant depends on whether a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy in that area.

Another federal law, the criminal harboring statute, prohibits concealing, harboring, or shielding from detection (or attempting to conceal, harbor, or shield) an undocumented immigrant, when done with knowledge or reckless regard of the immigrant's unlawful status.

Additionally, a federal criminal transporting law prohibits transporting or moving (or attempting to transport or move) an undocumented immigrant from one place to another, with knowledge or reckless disregard of the fact of the immigrant's unlawful status, where the transportation helps the immigrant remain in the United States unlawfully.

Ohio Law

Obstruction of Justice

In Ohio, there is also an "obstruction of justice" law that makes it unlawful to do any of the following with the intent to purposefully hinder the discovery or apprehension of another person who has committed or is suspected of committing a crime:

- Harbor or conceal that person;
- Provide money, transportation, disguise or other means of avoiding discovery;
- Warn that person of impending discovery;
- Destroy or conceal physical evidence;
- Communicate false information to anyone; or
- Prevent or obstruct—via force, intimidation, or deception—discovery of the other person.

This means that if someone has committed a crime, you cannot hide or assist them in avoiding detection from law enforcement. **Note that being undocumented, on its own, is not a crime—rather, it is a civil violation.** Most undocumented immigrants in our country entered legally, but overstayed or otherwise violated the terms of their visa, which is a civil violation, not a crime.

However, entering the U.S. without being inspected and admitted ("illegal entry") is a crime, and re-entering the U.S. without permission after being formally removed is also criminally punishable. (For more information, please read the [ACLU's issue brief on Criminalizing Undocumented Immigrants](#).)

Obstruction of Official Business

Ohio also has an "obstruction of official business" law that makes it a crime to purposefully hamper or impede an Ohio government official in the performance of their official duties.

This law covers many affirmative acts, such as physical resistance, subjecting officers to verbal abuse, and acting with a volume and demeanor that makes it impossible for the officers to investigate a complaint. Refusing to provide information to the police generally does not render one guilty of that offense.





FAQs

Obligation to enforce immigration law

Are Places of Worship required to enforce immigration laws?

No. Places of worship and their staff are not required and may not be forced to enforce immigration laws.

If an immigration official comes to your place of worship:

Under what circumstances can an immigration official, such as ICE, enter my house of worship?

If the immigration official has a judicial warrant:

- Generally, a judicial warrant—one signed by a state or federal judge—grants access to all spaces specified in the warrant, even non-public spaces.
- A judicial warrant will include the date and describe the place to be searched, and must have been issued within the past 14 days. The search should not exceed the scope of what is described in the judicial warrant.
- However, it is recommended that staff consult with legal counsel before permitting entry.

Here is an example of a judicial warrant issued by a federal court. (Note that a state court can also issue a judicial warrant.):

AO 93 (Rev. 11/13) Search and Seizure Warrant

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT for the

In the Matter of the Search of
(Briefly describe the property to be searched
or identify the person by name and address)

Case No.

SEARCH AND SEIZURE WARRANT

To: Any authorized law enforcement officer

An application by a federal law enforcement officer or an attorney for the government requests the search of the following person or property located in the _____ District of _____
(Identify the person or describe the property to be searched and give its location):

I find that the affidavit(s), or any recorded testimony, establish probable cause to search and seize the person or property described above, and that such search will reveal (Identify the person or describe the property to be seized):

YOU ARE COMMANDED to execute this warrant on or before _____ (not to exceed 14 days)
☐ in the daytime 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. ☐ at any time in the day or night because good cause has been established.

Unless delayed notice is authorized below, you must give a copy of the warrant and a receipt for the property taken to the person from whom, or from whose premises, the property was taken, or leave the copy and receipt at the place where the property was taken.

The officer executing this warrant, or an officer present during the execution of the warrant, must prepare an inventory as required by law and promptly return this warrant and inventory to _____
(United States Magistrate Judge)

☐ Pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3103a(b), I find that immediate notification may have an adverse result listed in 18 U.S.C. § 2705 (except for delay of trial), and authorize the officer executing this warrant to delay notice to the person who, or whose property, will be searched or seized (check the appropriate box)

☐ for _____ days (not to exceed 30) ☐ until, the facts justifying, the later specific date of _____

Date and time issued: _____ Judge's signature _____

City and state: _____ Printed name and title _____

If the immigration official has no warrant, or only has an administrative warrant (known as a deportation order):

- An administrative warrant—one signed by an officer, not a judge—only gives an immigration official the authority to enter public spaces, such as a lobby or waiting area that is open to the public.
- An administrative warrant does not grant an immigration official the authority to enter non-public spaces, such as a staff-only room, an examination room, or any other space that would be reasonably considered private.

Here is an example of an administrative warrant:

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY Warrant for Arrest of Alien

File No. _____

Date: _____

To: Any immigration officer authorized pursuant to sections 236 and 287 of the Immigration and Nationality Act and part 287 of title 8, Code of Federal Regulations, to serve warrants of arrest for immigration violations

I have determined that there is probable cause to believe that _____ is removable from the United States. This determination is based upon:

- ☐ the execution of a charging document to initiate removal proceedings against the subject;
- ☐ the pendency of ongoing removal proceedings against the subject;
- ☐ the failure to establish admissibility subsequent to deferred inspection;
- ☐ biometric confirmation of the subject's identity and a records check of federal databases that affirmatively indicate, by themselves or in addition to other reliable information, that the subject either lacks immigration status or notwithstanding such status is removable under U.S. immigration law; and/or
- ☐ statements made voluntarily by the subject to an immigration officer and/or other reliable evidence that affirmatively indicate the subject either lacks immigration status or notwithstanding such status is removable under U.S. immigration law.

YOU ARE COMMANDED to arrest and take into custody for removal proceedings under the Immigration and Nationality Act, the above-named alien.

(Signature of Authorized Immigration Officer)

(Printed Name and Title of Authorized Immigration Officer)

Certificate of Service

I hereby certify that the Warrant for Arrest of Alien was served by me at _____ (Location)

on _____ (Name of Alien) on _____ (Date of Service), and the contents of this

notice were read to him or her in the _____ (Language) language.

Name and Signature of Officer

Name or Number of Interpreter (if applicable)



Under what circumstances can an immigration official, such as ICE, enter my house of worship? CONTINUED

To enter any non-public space, an immigration official must have a judicial warrant.

- There are also some situations in which no warrant would be required, such as if the officials have consent from the property owner or if there are emergency circumstances.

It is strongly recommended that places of worship identify and distinguish (ideally with legal advice) public spaces from non-public ones.

- This can be done by placing signs identifying non-public areas, or by placing security guards tasked with signing in visitors at main entrances.

Even in a public space, however, staff can refuse entry to immigration officials or law enforcement officers for legitimate and non-discriminatory reasons.

- For example, if an immigration official is harassing employees or congregants, causing a disruption, or not complying with stated rules, they may be asked to leave the premises.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT WARRANTS AND SUBPOENAS, PLEASE VISIT THE [NATIONAL IMMIGRATION LAW CENTER'S GUIDANCE](#) ON THIS ISSUE.

Am I required to talk to a police officer or immigration official if they enter my place of worship and ask questions?

It Depends.

- You are generally not required to answer any questions by a law enforcement officer unless you have committed or are suspected of committing a crime, in which case you should, if asked, provide your name, date of birth, and address.
- You are generally not required to provide information about anyone's immigration status, and you should seek legal advice before answering any questions.

Is it permissible for immigration officials to be stationed outside or near a place of worship?

- Yes. If there are immigration officials outside or near your establishment, you can send a designated, well-trained staff member outside to ascertain the identity of the individuals.
- If your staff member can confirm that the officials stationed outside are immigration agents, your staff member, when they come back in, can remind people of their rights or prepare should the officials attempt to gain entry.

Declaration as Sanctuary

If a faith group publicly declares its place of worship as a "sanctuary" for immigrants, does that provide any additional legal protection to the group or to immigrants?

No. The concept of "sanctuary" in a place of worship is not recognized by federal law and it provides no additional protection from prosecution under state or federal laws for any violation of law by members of the group.

Are there any risks that could result if a faith group makes a public declaration as a "sanctuary" for immigrants?

- It depends. A declaration itself probably would not justify a prosecution, but it may put the group on the government's radar.
- Importantly, most courts have found the federal harboring and transporting statutes have an "intent" requirement, which means that to convict someone, the prosecutor must prove that the person or organization providing shelter to or transporting an undocumented immigrant intended to help the immigrant to remain unlawfully in the United States.
- In the event of a prosecution, having made a public declaration could put the group at more risk because it would help the prosecutor prove intent.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP

Prepare and implement an internal policy to protect congregants from immigration enforcement:

- Establish a written policy designating public and non-public areas, and place signs or otherwise identify the non-public areas.
- Create an internal protocol about how to interact with immigration agents, including protocol for handling law enforcement requests.
- Designate a well-trained individual or immigration advocacy group personnel to approach immigration officials outside or near the property.
- If an immigration official or law enforcement officer does not have a judicial warrant, and they are disturbing congregants, harassing employees, or otherwise causing a disruption, staff can ask the officer to leave.

To support immigrants' rights at your place of worship and in the community, your congregation may:

- Adopt a policy of nondiscrimination at your place of worship and of welcoming and helping persons in need, regardless of immigration or citizenship status, race, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation, etc.; make a public statement regarding such a policy.
- Adopt a policy that respects privacy by not asking members about their immigration status and does not record any information about any individual's immigration status.
- Provide shelter, food, or other services to a broad set of people, regardless of immigration status.
- Speak out on behalf of immigrants' rights, and express support for keeping families together and reforming the immigration laws to make it possible for undocumented immigrants to adjust to a lawful status.
- Support or work with local and state governmental authorities to adopt legislation and regulations that protect immigrants and refugees.
- Create and disseminate educational materials and "Know Your Rights" trainings for congregants and community members. patients, harassing staff, or otherwise causing a disruption, staff can ask the officer to leave.
 - [ACLU Know Your Rights: Immigration Enforcement](#)
 - [KYR graphics and wallet cards](#) (ACLU)
- Host or provide emergency safety planning for immigrant families.
 - [Family Safety Plan](#) (ILRC)
- Compile and provide contact information for local organizations providing free legal assistance for families.
 - [Immigration Advocates Network](#)

