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ICE blocks release of coronavirus testing information at jail, N.J. official says

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is blocking the Essex County jail from saying how many immigration detainees have been tested for the coronavirus, according to Essex County Chief of Staff Philip Alagia.

“We were officially notified today that ICE has prohibited us from reporting any information regarding their detainees including all of our test results,” Alagia wrote in an email Thursday. “Our attorneys are reviewing that notification.”

An ICE spokesman did not immediately respond to questions about why they were blocking the information, if they were going to release information on their own, or if coronavirus tests would continue.

Earlier in the month, the Essex County Correctional Facility became the first jail in the state to begin testing all inmates, which included immigration detainees.

It began reporting the total number of ICE detainees early April, when there were 566, and the county started issuing reports about how many had COVID-19 last week.

A total of 115 ICE detainees had been tested as of Monday. The vast majority (89) either tested positive or had “developed immunity to the virus after exposure,” according to the county.

An additional 85 New Jersey ICE detainees had been set free as of Tuesday due to “COVID-19 risk factors,” but ICE is also blocking the county from saying how many have been released going forward.

Essex still held 500 ICE detainees as of Wednesday, according to the county.

Officials will continue releasing test results for non-immigration inmates, Alagia said in a follow-up email.

ICE began releasing people last month amid the pandemic, around the same time the first detainees tested positive. One person described their conditions as “mice in a little box,” and another said sickness was “spreading like wildfire.”