News
Migration

Federal agents knock on the door of a residence Jan. 28, 2026, in Blaine, Minn. (AP/Adam Gray)

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Sinsinawa Dominican Sr. Margaret McGuirk and three associates are on the front lines of the effort to support immigrants in Minneapolis.

They aren't on the front lines of the protests against the federal crackdown that has resulted in the deaths of two American citizens and the chemical assaults on thousands of observers and protesters. Instead they're on the front lines of bringing food to immigrant families hiding in their apartments, providing legal aid to immigrants in the process of gaining permanent residency, giving rides to Latino teachers afraid to go to work, and helping pay the rent or utility bills for those unable to leave their homes for fear of arrest and deportation.

All four have seen everything change since the surge of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and Border Patrol officers into the city.

"It's like night and day. The night came when the federal government sent in 3,000 federal agents," McGuirk said. "They just filled south Minneapolis, which is where I work. It's terrifying."

McGuirk, who is bilingual, has worked in Latino ministry for 40 years. She said reports calling the crackdown an occupation or government terror are not exaggerated.

"We're very much aware of it going on around us," McGuirk said. "It's a constant presence — they are everywhere."

When she went to help a family sign disposition of parental authority papers — designating who will be guardians of their children if they are detained and/or deported — there were four vehicles of ICE agents waiting outside the entire time, she said.

A federal agent holds a chemical canister while questioning a person Jan. 27, 2026, in Minneapolis. (AP/Adam Gray)

Kathleen Motzenbecker, a Sinsinawa Dominican associate, is refugee services director for the Minnesota Council of Churches, working with legal immigrants. She said part of the terror is that federal agents are taking people who are here legally, including those who moved to the United States through the U.S. State Department's refugee resettlement program.

Motzenbecker said her agency has been working to respond to Operation PARRIS, which stands for Post Admission Refugee Reverification and Integrity Strengthening.

"This was the illegal arrest of legal refugees who have not received green cards [permanent residency] yet," she said. "They're legal, but they haven't got green cards yet because they're still in the queue. They're being kidnapped, really."

Motzenbecker said a federal judge has put a temporary restraining order on the operation. But in a Jan. 28 ruling, the chief federal judge in Minnesota said ICE has

violated 96 court orders in more than 70 cases since the crackdown began.

"ICE has likely violated more court orders in January 2026 than some federal agencies have violated in their entire existence," Chief U.S. District Judge Patrick J. Schiltz wrote in the court order.

Motzenbecker said there are about 5,600 legal refugees in Minnesota who don't yet have their green card and are at risk of deportation, despite following the law. There are similar operations in other states, as well, she said.

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She said a refugee from East Africa, the father of two young daughters, had lived in a refugee camp for eight years before being approved for resettlement. He got a letter saying he was required to attend an appointment at the federal building in Minneapolis. He was accompanied by Motzenbecker and an attorney, she said, but after waiting three hours, he was detained without being read his Miranda rights and flown to Texas, despite a federal court ordering his release.

"He was sponsored and had a job," Motzenbecker said. "I'm so grateful to the Dominican sisters for shining a light on this and allowing us to take part."

Mercy Sr. Mary Jo Baldus lives in Winona, Minnesota, about two hours southeast of Minneapolis. She said the federal operations are occurring there, too, with some immigrants being detained despite being here legally.

She hasn't seen any confrontations between federal agents and protesters yet, but she fears what will happen if she does.

"My MO is to fight and scream and holler," Baldus said. "I'm not going to just sit back and watch, so it is frightening."

Catholic sisters and sister organizations around the country have responded to the immigration crackdown and the apparent use of fear and violence by federal agents in carrying it out.

"At this moment in history, when fear is normalized, violence is amplified, and democratic life is under strain in the United States and across the world, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) raises a clear and unwavering

moral voice: **violence is not the Gospel response**," the organization said in a statement. "The way of Jesus calls us to a love that refuses harm, rejects domination, and insists on the dignity of every person."

Crosses and candles are placed at a makeshift memorial in Minneapolis Jan. 28, 2026, at the site where Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old intensive care unit nurse was fatally shot by federal agents. (OSV News/Reuters/Seth Herald)

The group, which represents about two-thirds of the sisters in the United States, said believers must choose a side.

"Love demands more than silence or neutrality. It requires truth-telling, moral courage, and a willingness to stand publicly with those whose lives and rights are threatened," the statement said. "Nonviolence is not passivity; it is disciplined, courageous action rooted in justice and hope."

The Sisters of Charity of New York have published a series of statements on social media calling out injustice, especially after federal agents shot and killed two

citizens.

"This was not an abstraction. This was not a policy debate. This was a human being — made in the image of God — killed by the state," their Jan. 9 post said, after 37-year-old mother and poet Renee Good was killed. "When government power meets human vulnerability with a loaded weapon, something has gone profoundly wrong — morally, spiritually, and socially."

When 37-year-old intensive care unit nurse Alex Pretti was killed by federal agents, apparently while unarmed and face down on a sidewalk, the congregation addressed reports of one of the officers involved saying, "Boo hoo," after Pretti's death. The congregation said it "should chill every person of conscience."

"Because when armed, masked, shielded agents can kill with impunity — and mock the dead — we are no longer talking about 'policy.' We are talking about the corrosion of humanity," their Jan. 26 post said. "And let us be honest: this is not about public safety. It is about protecting power — protecting white male dominance — at all costs."

The Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan, said prayer is needed, but so is action, and created a list of things you can do to stand for justice.

"We recognize that these deaths sit at the intersection of immigration policy, militarized enforcement and gun violence," the congregation wrote. "Our grief calls us not only to prayer, but to faithful action rooted in Catholic social teaching."

This story appears in the **Immigration Protests in Minneapolis** and **Immigration and the Church** feature series.