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Chicago church stops hosting in-person Spanish services amid fears of mass deportations from Trump administration



Pastor and community activist Emma Lozano helps lead a virtual service online from the empty sanctuary at Lincoln Methodist Church in Pilsen on Dec. 29, 2024. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)



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The church pews where Francisca Lino and her family had sat for services every Sunday are now empty. Though she once sought sanctuary in the Chicago church to avoid deportation, this time “not even that holy space feels safe,” she said.

Instead, Lino, a mother of six and wife of a U.S. citizen, plans to gather her family in front of a computer to watch a Spanish-language service at Lincoln United Methodist Church virtually every Sunday from now on.



Pastor and community activist Emma Lozano helps lead a virtual service from the empty sanctuary at Lincoln United Methodist Church in Pilsen on Dec. 29, 2024. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

"My family and I are tired of this," said Lino, whose Christmas was once again overshadowed by the uncertainty of her and her family's future in the country.

After the threats from the incoming Trump administration that Chicago will be the epicenter of mass deportations, Emma Lozano, an activist and pastor at Lincoln United Methodist, decided to move its Spanish services online as the church prepares to protect its undocumented immigrant community. The services in English will remain in-person.

The Pilsen church, Lozano said, has been vandalized and attacked by right-wing extremists in the past.

"We must take their threats seriously and prepare for the worst," Lozano said.

that fear is beginning to settle in among the immigrant community in the Chicago area. Advocates and local leaders warn that mass deportations could affect undocumented, mixed-status and new migrant families alike. Even if that is the case, the Mexican community is expected to experience the most deportations, according to Chicago political leaders and immigration advocates. That's because they make up the largest group of immigrants in the country.

"They're coming to our schools, they're coming to our hospital, they're coming to our churches and sanctuaries on Sundays," former congressman Luis Gutierrez said at a December news conference at City Hall, where he and other leaders submitted a letter to Mayor Brandon Johnson to ask for the community's protection. "... They've done it before and they'll do it again. No one is safe."

President-elect Donald Trump plans to rescind a longstanding policy within Immigration and Customs Enforcement that prevents unauthorized arrests of undocumented immigrants in schools, hospitals and places of worship, according to reports.

The news of the plan alarmed Lozano because her church is also the headquarters of Centro Sin Fronteras, a nonprofit pro-immigrant-rights organization that has represented many immigrants at risk of deportation, including Lino.

Many members of Lincoln United Methodist are also mixed-status families that come together not only to pray but to support each other as they fight deportation.



Vehicles drive past Lincoln United Methodist Church on Dec. 22, 2024. The church holds two services on Sundays, an English-language service in the morning and a mostly Spanish one in the afternoon. But with President-elect Donald Trump's mass deportation threats, the afternoon service has moved to an online worship service. (Armando L. Sanchez/Chicago Tribune)

"Our worship service is going to be virtual now because we are not going to be set up so that they can come into our church and separate the children from their families," Lozano said.

Lino, who took sanctuary at a Humboldt Park church in 2017 to avoid deportation during Trump's first term, has a scheduled check-in with immigration authorities Feb. 13, just weeks after Trump takes office again.

She said her deepest fear is that she will not be able to avoid deportation this time. Now a grandmother of eight, Lino spends time with her family and does not watch the news.

"I try not to think about it," she said. "We are tired of hiding and living this way, of hiding from the world."

Lino has no criminal record and has lived and worked in this country for nearly 25 years, said her lawyer, Chris Bergin. She was arrested while crossing the southern border in 1999 and deported back to Mexico. She crossed the border again in 2001 and settled in Bolingbrook, where she married her husband the same year.

Lino then applied for legal residency through her husband. She received a work permit and a Social Security number. However, Lino was arrested in 2005 during an interview with immigration authorities because although she admitted to her initial arrest, her application did not include the information, Bergin said.

Since then, Lino has been in deportation proceedings but has been allowed to remain in the country by meeting with ICE agents annually.

However, at her first check-in under the Trump administration in 2017, she was told she needed to [attend her check-in with a flight ticket](#) to Mexico in hand.

"I'm afraid this time, I will have to say goodbye to my family. But I hope that the Trump administration keeps their word that only criminals are deported," Lino said.



Incoming U.S. "border czar" Tom Homan talks to state troopers and National Guardsmen taking part in Operation Lone Star at a facility on the U.S.-Mexico border on Nov. 26, 2024, in Eagle Pass, Texas. (Eric Gay/AP)

During a brief visit to Chicago in early December, Tom Homan, Trump's so-called border czar, told a group of Illinois Republicans that ICE intended to target the deportation of criminals regardless of Mayor Johnson's support for immigrants. But what will be considered criminal is unknown. Homan also said the administration will verify the status of asylum-seekers.

Though Trump also threatened to stop federal funding to sanctuary cities such as Chicago, both Johnson and Gov. JB Pritzker vowed to protect the immigrant community.

But the blurred line lies between who and what is considered a criminal and who is not, Lozano said.

“We’ve seen what Trump is capable of. He had a first round and knew how to attack better this time.”

While advocates believe mass deportations would mostly affect Mexican families because they make up the largest group of the 11 million immigrants in the U.S. without legal permission, Bergin said every immigrant is at risk, even those with an asylum case or temporary protected status and those who have Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals status.

“We should hope and pray for the best but prepare for the worst with the incoming Trump administration,” Bergin said.

Several pro-immigrant organizations throughout the city have begun to plan “know your rights” workshops and distribute resources advising community members on how to prepare for possible deportations.

“Don’t open the door and don’t sign anything,” Gutierrez said. Bergin also advised that those who are here without documentation prepare a power of attorney to protect their children, money and property.

Erendira Rendon, vice president of immigrant justice for The Resurrection Project, said her legal team is preparing to take on more deportation cases when the Trump administration takes over. In the meantime, the team is working with the Illinois Venezuela Alliance to process as many applications as possible for asylum and temporary protected status.



Pastor and community activist Emma Lozano helps lead a virtual service from the empty sanctuary on Dec. 29, 2024, at Lincoln United Methodist Church in Pilsen. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

The Chicago area's Venezuelan community, made up mostly of the approximately 50,000 migrants who have arrived from the southern U.S. border in the last two years, "are worried and fearful," said Jose Balboa, president of the alliance. In recent weeks, after Homan's visit, the organization has gotten an increasing number of calls from migrants seeking support and guidance.

"Many are afraid to stay in the shelters, parents afraid to take their children to school and others wonder if they should go to work," said Balboa, who also sought asylum in the U.S. from Venezuela.

Balboa considers the new migrants at a higher risk of being deported because most are registered in some way with the immigration department, either having filed an asylum case or waiting for a court visit. That means that upon attending their interview with immigration, their applications for asylum, and refugee status or Temporary Protection Status, can be easily denied when Trump takes office, he said.

"Unlike those who are undocumented, the federal government has a way of tracing the new migrants," Balboa said.

In mid-December, nearly 200 new migrants gathered in a prayer circle in Little Village, said pastor Matt De Mateo. He said faith leaders are in conversations about the role the churches can have in protecting people from deportation.

In a statement, Brandon Lee of the The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights said that organization is preparing for Chicago and Illinois to be targeted by creating a plan to connect community members to local rapid-response teams.

Everything about how the mass deportations will take place in Chicago or across the country, however, remains unclear. Still, many are preparing, urging each other to rise above the fear.

"We must prepare but we must not hide," said Dolores Castañeda, a Little Village mother and community leader who has worked alongside undocumented immigrants for many years. For many longtime families in the country without legal permission, the threats of deportation are nothing new, she said.

The average undocumented person has been in the country for more than 15 years, and many have learned to live with the fear, she said. There are more than half a million undocumented people in Illinois, according to the latest research, though the number could vary because many go under the radar.

During a march Dec. 18, more than a dozen immigrants marched from the Little Village Arch to St. Agnes of Bohemia Catholic Church as a way to raise awareness in the community of the possible deportations and urge immigrants to stay alert.

For Belesda Toledo, a mother of four, marching was something she did for herself.

"It made me feel strong and in community," she said. "I'm afraid, but I also have faith that God is with us and he protects our future, whatever it may be."

Toledo arrived in Chicago two decades ago from Guerrero, Mexico. Her four children are U.S. citizens. She said she and her children are active participants at the church and she cleans houses from time to time.

"I'm not a criminal; the father of my children works to make sure our children go to school and have everything we didn't have," Toledo said.

She said she agrees that those who have committed crimes should be deported. She said that if the administration creates a vetting process that could also consider the contributions many, including her and her husband, have made to the country, then they could have an opportunity to stay here lawfully.

While Toledo has no plans to stop living her normal life, including going to church at St. Agnes of Bohemia every Sunday, she said things could change come Jan. 20, when Trump takes office.

"I have faith that we will be able to stay," she said.



Pastor Cecilia Garcia stands inside Lincoln United Methodist Church on Dec. 22, 2024. (Armando L. Sanchez/Chicago Tribune)

In the meantime, at Lincoln United Methodist in Pilsen, the pews will remain empty and the church quiet.

During the first virtual service the Sunday before Christmas, pastor Cecilia Garcia cried. Her husband was deported nearly a decade ago and the feeling of uncertainty and fear felt familiar, she said.

"It's happening again and we don't know how many families will be affected."

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