



**CITIES FOR ACTION**

**CASE STUDIES OF CITIES' RESPONSES TO  
TRAVEL BAN EXECUTIVE ORDER'S  
IMPACT AT U.S. AIRPORTS 1/27-1/29**



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# Table of Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations .....	2
Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction .....	4
Atlanta, GA – Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport .....	5
Los Angeles, CA – Los Angeles International Airport .....	6
New York City, NY – John F. Kennedy International Airport .....	7
Philadelphia, PA – Philadelphia International Airport .....	9
Conclusion .....	10

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

**ACLU** – American Civil Liberties Union

**AILA** – American Immigration Lawyers Association

**ATL** – Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta International Airport

**CBP** – Customs and Border Patrol

**EO** – Executive Order

**ICE** – Immigration and Customs Enforcement

**IRAP** – International Refugee Assistance Program

**JFK** – John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City

**LAX** – Los Angeles International Airport

**LPR** – Legal Permanent Resident of the United States

**PHL** – Philadelphia International Airport



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### Executive Summary

In response to the President's "travel ban" Executive Order, signed on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017, communities nationwide were left scrambling to manage the chaotic immediate impacts of the order's implementation. In the midst of this confusion, mayors in several cities across the country took swift action in support of immigrants. As leaders closest to the community level, mayors and their representatives provided information to families and community groups, supported coordination among volunteers and non-profits, and advocated on behalf of impacted individuals and families with Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) officials on the ground.

This report presents a number of case studies from cities across the country and examines how each municipality led efforts in the immediate aftermath of the EO's implementation. These case studies may be helpful for cities post implementation of the Administration's new travel ban EO, anticipated for March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, or to help inform other rapid response efforts in the future.

The findings of the case studies are:

- 1) Public pressure from protestors, advocates and family members brought widespread attention to the issues at the airports and spurred action among key players.
- 2) Local CBP officials were often waiting for instructions from Washington, DC about how to proceed, which led to limited information being shared with lawyers, families, and advocates.
- 3) Mayors and their staff helped facilitate communication among family members, volunteer attorneys, and customs officials, as well as with Congressional representatives.
- 4) Social media helped spread awareness of protests and information about people being detained and their circumstances.

Based on these findings, the following may be considered best practices for cities in these cases:

- 1) Fully utilize the power of mayors' offices to obtain and disseminate information to constituents.
- 2) Dedicate specific office personnel to focus on immigration issues, so that in-house expertise can be immediately deployable in crisis situations.
- 3) Deepen relationships and develop rapid response channels of communication with advocates and local immigrants' rights organizations, so cities can continue to be nimble in helping facilitate communications and coordination.
- 4) Establish relationships with members of Congress with respect to joint advocacy for immigrant residents.
- 5) Utilize social media to share information quickly with affected parties and broader public.



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### Introduction

On Friday, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017, President Trump signed an Executive Order titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” Among other directives, the order:

- Halted entry for individuals from seven Muslim-majority countries –Iraq, Iran, Syria, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, and Sudan – for 90 days, with the possibility that more countries may be added after the conclusion of the 90-day period;
- Gave priority to admissions of individuals claiming refugee status on the basis of religious persecution, provided that the religion is the minority in the individuals country of origin; and
- Temporarily suspended refugee admissions, with an indefinite suspension for Syrian refugee admissions.

The Executive Order failed to outline an implementation period or process, accordingly, CBP was left to implement the order in a vacuum of information and often waiting on instruction from headquarters in Washington, DC. The immediate implementation led to chaos and confusion among individuals en route to the United States or planning to travel. This was evident in the inconsistent implementation of the EO and lack of communication to those in transit and their families stateside. Reports indicate that many travelers in transit during the Executive Order announcement were detained at airports nationwide for lengthy time periods and had difficulty communicating with their families or attorneys. Because CBP was often waiting on guidance from headquarters, information about individuals detained at airports was very difficult to obtain. The situation created great anxiety and fear for families waiting for their loved ones. In some cases, individuals detained pursuant to the Executive Order were sent back abroad.

Soon after the announcement of the Executive Order, thousands of people started to gather at airports nationwide in response. In this unprecedented moment, city leaders found themselves on the front lines, and took a strong stance in support of immigrant communities. Elected officials, lawyers, advocates, and mayors’ offices dedicated a significant time on the ground to demonstrate their leadership and commitment on this issue. Those efforts were critical to protecting the most vulnerable individuals affected by the EO.

This report highlights examples of cities responding to events unfolding at airports across the country. The case studies provide lessons learned for city and county offices in rapidly responding to new policies or orders that affect immigrant populations.

### Case Studies

[Atlanta, GA – Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport](#)

[Los Angeles, CA – Los Angeles International Airport](#)

[New York City, NY – John F. Kennedy International Airport](#)

[Philadelphia, PA – Philadelphia International Airport](#)



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### Atlanta, GA – Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport

#### **Background:**

At ATL airport, approximately 11 individuals were detained due to the president's Executive Order, although these numbers were not confirmed by CBP. These individuals were LPRs or visa holders of the countries impacted in the EO. Regardless of their status, these travelers were held for several hours without access to counsel.

#### **Response:**

Protesters began assembling on Saturday morning at ATL airport in response to the Executive Order. Atlanta's Mayor's office representatives spoke with CBP officials about the individuals being held at the airport. Congress member John Lewis was present at the airport to push for more information about detainees. City officials were able to communicate with CBP agents and collect information about detained travelers, which could have been a result of the city owning the airport. Mayor's office representatives communicated this information to the volunteer attorneys, assembled by the Georgia chapter of AILA, who helped to draft habeas petitions for the detained individuals.

Mayor Kasim Reed appeared at the airport in the afternoon to provide support to families of detained travelers. By 11:30pm on Saturday, the mayor announced that all 11 detained individuals were released from the airport. There were no other reported cases of detained travelers or people removed for extensive screening after his announcement.

#### **Lessons Learned:**

Atlanta officials were able to leverage the public pressure, appearances of members of Congress, and the city's ownership of the airport to communicate with CBP and obtain information about detained individuals. City officials coordinated with the pro-bono attorneys present at the airport to work on efficiently obtaining the release of those detained. CBP was responsive to the habeas petitions filed by volunteer attorneys and released everyone on the first day. The city's prior relationship with airport and CBP officials may have helped with communication among key players.



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### Los Angeles, CA – Los Angeles International Airport

#### **Background:**

Beginning on Friday, January 27<sup>th</sup>, several hundred arriving travelers at Los Angeles International Airport were delayed or detained for at least a few hours—some for 24 hours or more. Sleeping arrangements were not provided to detained travelers and limited food and water was provided. There was limited information available about detained travelers' conditions or progress regarding their release. Thousands of family members and friends of detained travelers waited at the airport along with hundreds of volunteer attorneys and hundreds of protestors.

#### **Response:**

Protests in response to the Executive Order began on Saturday morning at LAX with hundreds of protestors gathered at LAX's international terminals. The public pressure was magnified by social media posts and reporting by traditional media outlets.

Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) staff members were present at the airport beginning on Saturday morning to coordinate responses with the Mayor's Office of Public Safety, the ACLU, and over 200 volunteer attorneys. These attorneys specialized in a wide range of legal fields and were recruited by immigrant rights and legal organizations, social media, or a call to action from other attorneys.

Throughout the weekend, lawyers, airport/city officials, and family members had limited access to information on those detained. This presented a challenge for the dozens of lawyers who showed up to provide counsel. Reports also suggested that detained passengers felt pressured to sign forms voluntarily surrendering LPR status. Volunteer attorneys were quick to advise families of detained travelers against signing any documents without proper counsel.

Public pressure increased on Sunday as approximately 6000 people gathered to protest the travel ban. Mayor Eric Garcetti went to LAX on Sunday, January 29<sup>th</sup> to meet with local CBP leadership, hold a press availability, and meet with leading volunteer attorneys and family members awaiting loved ones. Within hours of the meeting with CBP, three detained Iranian individuals—whose family members Mayor Garcetti had met—were released after nearly 24 hours of detention.

#### **Lessons Learned:**

One of the city's key learnings was the need to be nimble and ready to deploy quickly. The city experienced the importance of staying in regular communication with attorneys and advocates dealing with detained immigrants and their families on the ground. In addition, the city recognized the importance of leveraging public pressure through activism and peaceful protest which helped spur action from federal judges and customs officials.



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### New York City, NY – John F. Kennedy International Airport

#### **Background:**

Following the travel ban Executive Order from the President, nearly two dozen travelers were detained at JFK airport. The detained travelers included Hameed Khalid Darweesh, who had worked with the U.S. government in Iraq, and Haider Sameer Abdulkhaleq Alshawi, who was reuniting with his wife who worked for a U.S. contractor in Iraq. Scores of volunteer lawyers and advocates assembled at JFK but were not provided with access to their clients.

#### **Response:**

As information began spreading about the effect of the travel ban on Saturday morning, a small protest of approximately three dozen people began forming at JFK airport. At the same time, the NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) and the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit mobilized to the airport to coordinate with advocates and government officials to help facilitate the release of detained travelers. Immediately upon arrival at the airport, MOIA began working with volunteer attorneys who were facing difficulty obtaining information about the detainees. MOIA leaders helped to coordinate and support lawyers with efforts including canvassing families waiting for the arrival of their relatives.

MOIA's immigration expertise and coordination capacity were critical to the direct ground response. MOIA staff accompanied members of Congress in conversations with CBP, and helped them to frame relevant and effective questions. MOIA worked closely with members of the New York delegation, including Congressmembers Nydia Velazquez, Jerry Nadler, who were already on the ground, and were later joined by Adriano Espaillat, Yvette Clarke, Hakeem Jeffries, Gregory Meeks, and Joseph Crowley, as well as with Senator Schumer's office, to liaise among CBP officials, families, and volunteer attorneys. The Speaker Mark-Viverito of the City Council's team, NYC Council member Carlos Menchaca, and State Senator Gustavo Rivera were also present and helped to lead the response. The International Refugee Assistance Project coordinated volunteer attorneys, who stood ready to provide assistance to arrivals and their families, filing habeas corpus petitions in several instances. MOIA worked with the volunteer attorneys to ensure that CBP officials had the latest updates about litigation developments against the travel ban. Cities for Action cities were in touch with one another throughout this effort. For example, MOIA's commissioner stayed connected with Philadelphia MOIA's director to share ideas and approaches.

After the injunction from the court case, MOIA's commissioner hand-delivered the legal paperwork to CBP—at the request of the lawyers involved—due to concern that this information would not be immediately communicated or shared and people would continue to be put on return flights.

Communication platforms and social media played a major role in the rapid response effort. MOIA utilized several social media vehicles including Twitter and Facebook Live video, which was used to stream updates from the airport to amplify the local impact of the order. Social media was centrally important in raising awareness about activities so that cities could learn from one another. NYC-based immigrant rights groups sent out alerts and calls to action for advocates and protestors. At its peak, protests at the airport grew to 3000, with major press presence amplifying and highlighting the issue.



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**Lessons Learned:**

At the height of the crisis, MOIA's relationships with advocacy organizations, members of Congress, and volunteer attorneys helped accelerate the release of detained individuals. MOIA streamlined the process by identifying family members of detainees, working with members of Congress to ascertain information, and providing that information to volunteer attorneys to create habeas pleas. The volume of protestors helped put public pressure on judges to issue emergency decisions and for customs officials to follow those orders. Social media and traditional media amplified city efforts.





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### Philadelphia, PA – Philadelphia International Airport

#### **Background:**

Individuals in transit when the Executive Order was announced began arriving into Philadelphia early Saturday morning. Although the City of Philadelphia owns PHL airport, they found it difficult to obtain information about detained travelers. It is estimated that up to 15 people were detained, but exact numbers were not confirmed. Individuals detained and sent back to the Middle East included an Iranian woman traveling on a visitor's visa and a Syrian family of five. Anecdotal information suggests that the most impacted individuals were Iranians, Iraqis, and Syrians.

#### **Response:**

Members of Philadelphia's Mayor's Office were present at PHL airport to facilitate the release of detained travelers at the airport. There were an estimated 200 protestors at the initial protest at the airport on Saturday evening.

By Saturday night, the Office of Immigrant Affairs (OIA), staffers from the Mayor's Office, and Mayor Kenney were joined by Councilwoman Helen Gym, U.S. Representatives Bob Brady and Dwight Evans, Senator Bob Casey, and Governor Wolf. Senator Casey and Representative Brady negotiated with CBP agents and were able to speak with detained travelers and connect them with legal representation. Mayor Kenney also provided updates to activists, lawyers, and families awaiting their loved ones.

On Sunday, as news spread about the conditions at the airport, protests grew larger. There were an estimated 5000 protestors at PHL airport, many of whom were mobilized through a Facebook event. Mayor Kenney issued a statement on Sunday morning, stating that all detained travelers were released from PHL airport and arriving passengers should not expect issues related to the travel ban. On Tuesday, Mayor Kenney held a joint press conference with ACLU attorneys to update the public on what was happening.

Approximately 1-2 weeks later, the Syrian family and the Iranian woman were allowed to return to the United States due to public pressure and internal advocacy by members of Congress.

#### **Lessons Learned:**

Efforts in Philadelphia were successful due to collaboration among key players. The Mayor's Office and OIA staff members engaged members of Congress to negotiate with CBP while lawyers were present to provide legal counsel and write petitions for the release of detained travelers. Large public protests, traditional media, and social media helped bring widespread attention to the effect of the travel ban at airports.



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### Conclusion

In response to the Administration's January 2017 Executive Order, mayors' offices successfully organized a coordinated airport response together with other key leaders, including lawyers, members of Congress, advocates, and city officials. Without prior precedent, those local leaders responded swiftly and strongly to assist and defend vulnerable immigrants and refugees.

The response was successful because of advocacy from a range of stakeholders, coordination of lawyers and elected officials by mayors' offices, and strategic communication through traditional and social media channels. Based on the January events, cities are recommended to deepen relationships with local advocates, elected officials, and attorneys for future coordinated efforts, and to develop and utilize a social media plan during rapid response situations. Mayors' offices are also recommended to create an office of immigrant affairs or designate dedicated immigration staff members.

As immigrants face growing challenges nationally, cities remain committed to protecting and integrating these communities. The lessons from these case studies will enable city leaders to be even better positioned to respond effectively to any future concerns to their residents.