

Federal judge orders Iranian bodybuilder's release from New Mexico jail

BY: PATRICK LOHMANN - DECEMBER 16, 2025 5:35 AM



📷 A federal judge in Albuquerque on Dec. 15, 2025 ordered ICE to immediately release Hamid Ziaei, an Iranian man held for the last six months at the Tarrant County Detention Facility. (Courtesy Innovation Law Lab)

A federal judge in Albuquerque on Monday ordered the immediate release of an Iranian man held at an Estancia immigration lockup for the last six months, agreeing with his lawyers that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency was not acting quickly enough to deport him to a third country, his lawyers told Source New Mexico.

Hamid Ziaei, 42, came to the United States in 2024 from Iran, where he said he feared retribution after using his platform as a prominent bodybuilder to speak out against the government, his lawyers said. A judge in June 2024 granted Ziaei protection from removal to Iran, but ICE agents arrested him a year later when he arrived at a scheduled immigration appointment in San Diego.

ICE incarcerated Ziaei at the Torrance County Detention Facility in Estancia soon after his arrest. That's where he met lawyers from the Innovation Law Lab, based in Portland, Oregon, who in early November filed a petition on his behalf arguing that his continued detention, which they described as "indefinite," violated his constitutional due process rights.

Over the last six months in ICE detention in Estancia, Ziaei did not have adequate food or water, and he grew depressed as he awaited updates about his immigration case or possible release, attorney Tiffany Wang told Source on Monday in an interview after the hearing. His experience is common there, Wang said, and underscores her organization's push [for ICE to close the facility](#).

The jail Ziaei is set to leave has been subject to renewed scrutiny for weeks, after an agreement between ICE, Torrance County and CoreCivic, the private company that owns and operates the jail, expired Oct. 31. Since the expiration, the population has [sharply declined](#) from up to 700 detainees in May, according to new data.

CoreCivic spokesperson Brian Todd previously told Source New Mexico that it continues to provide "safe, humane and respectful care" to detainees despite the contract's expiration, and that the population may fluctuate week to week but that it's "nothing out of the ordinary, and our operations have remained unchanged."

Wang estimated Monday that only 100 or so detainees are currently incarcerated there at the moment.

"The Torrance County Detention Facility is not fit to hold anybody. Mr. Ziaei has suffered from respiratory issues since the day he was detained in there," Wang said "He's not receiving adequate food. His mental health has significantly declined, obviously, both being detained and just the fact that he hasn't been told anything."

Judge Matthew Garcia during Monday's hearing pressed Ryan Posey, a prosecutor with the United States Attorney's Office in New Mexico, for answers about the government's efforts to deport Ziaei to a country other than Iran, according to Ziaei's lawyers. Posey could not say what country the government intended to deport Ziaei to, they said, or when they intended to deport him.

Garcia ordered Ziaei's release from Estancia within 24 hours, according to a summary of the proceedings prepared by a court clerk. He said he would issue an order requiring Ziaei's release by Monday.

The United States Attorney's Office declined to comment, a spokesperson told Source on Monday.

Plaintiffs in the case are local and federal officials at ICE, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, Attorney General Pam Bondi and Melissa Ortiz, acting warden at the facility.