# NEWS

*"Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it; let's do it, let's fall in love."*
**COLE PORTER '13** AMERICAN COMPOSER AND SONGWRITER

## Witnessing ICE arrests and nonprofit cuts, locals decry Trump policies

BY NELLIE KENNEY
STAFF REPORTER

A group of New Haveners, clad in bright colors and carrying paper cranes, sang out advice for resisting Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers at a recent May Day rally on the New Haven Green: "Don't say anything, don't sign anything. Don't let them trick you into opening the door."

Local activists — like these members of Singing Resistance New Haven, a chapter of the national organization — have mobilized in response to sweeping federal policy changes and their local effects since the beginning of Donald Trump's second presidential term. New Haven advocates described an atmosphere of anxiety amid both the Trump administration's immigration crackdown and federal cuts to social services, which have jeopardized local access to food.

The "biggest thing, both for attorneys and for non-citizens living in the U.S." is the "uncertainty and how quickly things are changing," Maureen Abell, an immigration attorney at the New Haven Legal Assistance Association, said in a phone interview last Friday.

Federal immigration officers have arrested at least five people in New Haven this year as part of the president's ongoing mass deportation operation. ICE arrests increased by around 300 percent in New England in the first seven months of Trump's presidency, according to data from the Immigration Research Initiative.

Abell pointed to cases of federal immigration officers arresting people while leaving court or at green-card interviews. Although these arrests comprised "a small percentage of cases," she said, the practice is "still having a huge effect through how afraid it is making people to engage with the system."

ICE detained a woman from the Hill neighborhood last June and a Wilbur Cross High School student the following month. The student, Esdrás Zabaleta-Ramirez, was later released following a ruling by a federal immigration judge. In January 2026, ICE arrested three people in downtown New Haven and another person in a New Haven courthouse. In March, federal agents arrested a nursing student at Southern Connecticut State University, Keyla Vasquez-Zuniga, who was granted bond last week.




ALEX HONG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Donald Trump's second presidential term has jolted New Haven with arrests by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and slashed funding for and access to social services. Local activists and nonprofit leaders continue to protest.

Those arrests have sparked an array of local protests. In July 2025, over a hundred people gathered at Wilbur Cross to protest Zabaleta-Ramirez' detention. Teachers at the school led a letter-writing campaign attesting to the student's schoolwork and character. Last month, students and activists rallied at Southern Connecticut State University, calling for Vasquez-Zuniga's release.

New Haven has also been the site of protests against ICE activity at the national level. In response to the deaths of Renée Good and Alex Pretti this January during the Trump administration's crackdown in Minneapolis, locals formed the New Haven chapter of Singing Resistance and organized four demonstrations, each with at least a hundred attendees, in January and February.

As organizers gather to protest immigration enforcement actions, nearby city organizations continue to grapple with federal funding cuts and locals describe increased food insecurity due to Trump-era policy.

Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, a local nonprofit that aids refugee resettlement, closed its New Haven office in April 2025 after its funding was slashed by the federal government. The organization was also forced to lay off 30 percent of its staff, Maggie Mitchell Salem, the nonprofit's executive director, told the News in February.

In 2024, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services had a budget of over $20 million, most of which was provided by the federal government, Mitchell Salem said in a phone interview last Friday. In 2025, following federal funding cuts, its budget dropped to around $11 million, and this year, it hovers around $7 million, Mitchell Salem said — a number which will continue to decrease as funding to support Afghan arrivals "sunsets" in September.

Mitchell Salem called the fallout of federal cuts "painful," adding that for many immigrants, the organization's New Haven location was one of the "first places they went to receive support and services" in the United States.

"We're having to make some very tough choices, and we have to figure out what the people we serve need most," she said. "What, reasonably, can IRIS do through our food pantry, through our array of program services? And then what do others do, perhaps better than us? And how can we all work together to de-duplicate, to make sure that the most essential services remain available while having to cut back on others?"

The Trump administration's policy has altered the nonprofit's partnerships as well as its funding, Mitchell Salem said.

In October, the nonprofit announced that it would not receive refugees from the United States Refugee Admissions Program after the Trump administration moved to prioritize the resettlement of Afrikaners, a white minority group in South Africa.

"We have never really questioned who the federal government was sending. And now we are," Mitchell Salem said.

Other local nonprofits have felt the impacts of federal actions through their effects on the populations that these organizations seek to help.

Steve Werlin, the executive director of New Haven's Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen, wrote in an email to the News that the greatest effects of federal policy "on the food assistance side" have been changes brought on by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

The act, which Trump signed last July, tightened the work requirements around eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, restricted eligibility for non-citizens, made changes to benefit calculations and shifted payment responsibilities onto states, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"Many of the people we serve have lost eligibility completely, or have seen their monthly allocations through SNAP decreased," Werlin wrote. He also noted blocked funding to the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, which had been "pumping millions of dollars of food assistance funding directly to community providers across the country."

Werlin hypothesized that the "atmosphere of fear" created by immigration crackdowns has "made it more difficult for people to access food."

Kimberly Hart, a member of the board of directors for the Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry, has seen a "drop in migrants coming to the pantry," she said.

Hart said that changes to the SNAP program "disrupt" the lives of "have-nots." SNAP was "working very well" before the changes, she said.

6,626 New Haveners — about 17.4 percent of the city's total voters — voted for Trump in 2024, according to the News' coverage at the time.

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## New Haven fights back against an antagonistic Trump administration

BY EVELYN RONAN
STAFF REPORTER

Since the beginning of President Donald Trump's second term, New Haven has been targeted by the federal government as part of its crackdown against progressive and sanctuary cities.

The city has responded with a series of coalition lawsuits and amicus briefs opposing the federal government, with local and state officials seeking to distance their political priorities with those of the Trump administration. In March, the federal government sued New Haven back, alleging that the city's policies impede cooperation between local authorities and federal immigration enforcement.

New Haven has joined five lawsuits and 24 amicus briefs since Trump took office, challenging policies related to immigration enforcement, federal funding, municipal authority and cuts to social welfare programs.

In January 2025, the federal government released a memo which froze roughly $3 trillion in nonprofit and local government funds that provide the essential short-term cash flow allowing cities like New Haven to maintain regular operations. The motion was rescinded just as Mayor Justin Elicker was condemning the action at a Hartford press conference.

A month later, the city signed an amicus brief alleging that the National Institutes of Health's research funding cuts would destabilize the scientific research ecosystem and pose threats to early-career researchers, lamenting the "slash-and-burn philosophy" of the Trump administration regarding crucial funding, according to previous interviews with the News.

Mayor Justin Elicker offered his first major commentary on the federal blows last February at his annual State of the City address, where he briefly alluded to the federal targeting of sanctuary cities like New Haven and disapproved of the Trump administration's aims to defund diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

Soon after, New Haven joined several Democrat-led municipalities in a lawsuit arguing that Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration violated several clauses that protect municipal autonomy and unjustly targeted cities like New Haven for their "sanctuary" status.

Last March, when announcing his proposed budget for fiscal year 2026, Elicker emphasized the difference between New Haven's political posture and that of the Trump administration. Elicker also criticized the unpredictability of the Trump administration's financial cutbacks, which he said makes it difficult for municipalities to draw up spending plans. He noted that New Haven is exercising "fiscal caution," and that public entities like New Haven Public Schools rely on funding from the federal government.

A month later, New Haven signed on to another lawsuit, which alleged that recent funding freezes to environment-related initiatives — including the termination of $20 billion in grant funding, $30 million of which was designated for New Haven — were illegal. That March, Elicker lamented the federal government "turning its back on cities" despite binding agreements in an interview with the News.

Later that year, in October, New Haven joined another lawsuit which challenged the Department of Homeland Security's updated terms and conditions for grant recipients. New regulations required recipients to agree not to "operate any programs that advance or promote DEI, DEIA, or discriminatory equity ideology."

The lawsuit coincided with last year's New Haven mayoral race. Facing a Republican challenger, Elicker continued to emphasize New Haven's "progressive values." In a debate, he called the city the "most welcoming" in the world, alluding again to its sanctuary status.

Allie Jacobs, the city's primary legal counsel, said that New Haven weighs the benefits of joining the legal fight against the federal government against the fact that doing so could invite more scrutiny from Trump.

"We assess whether the city, its interest, or its residents would be significantly adversely impacted by a particular law, policy, or judicial decision," Jacobs wrote in an email to the News. "Sometimes that takes the form of joining a lawsuit if we have standing, sometimes that takes the form of an amicus brief, and sometimes that takes the form of other advocacy approaches."

When announcing New Haven's participation in the lawsuit against the DHS, Elicker said that he was not concerned with drawing extra attention to New Haven.

"I hear from some of my mayoral colleagues out there that they don't want to make their cities a target," Elicker said at a press conference at the time. "Now is a time that we should not be hiding. Now is a time that we should be standing up and fighting for the values of our community, both because at some point we're all going to be a target anyway, but more importantly, because this is the right thing to do."

Days after New Haven joined the lawsuit against the DHS, Elicker contrasted the city's balanced budget with the financial gridlock at the federal level that had resulted in a shutdown.

"We in New Haven are continuing to do things differently by providing transparent, reliable, and stable budgeting," he said at a press conference on the city's fiscal outlook. "It's what our residents deserve."

Two weeks later, New Haven joined a lawsuit filed by a coalition of municipalities, charities, religious organizations, business and unions against the Trump administration's decision not to fund Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits in the wake of the government shutdown.

In response to the federal government's cuts to SNAP funding — which Elicker condemned as "cruelty" that "blocked food from the table of 30,000 New Haveners" in a November interview with the News — Connecticut set aside $500 million for an emergency relief fund that subsidized food stamps during the government shutdown.

In December 2025, New Haven joined a fifth lawsuit against the federal government, led by the Public Rights Project, over the federal government's attempt to claw back over $12 billion in local funding designated for transit and public healthcare programs. The federal government declared that states would need to change policies on DEI initiatives, immigration, and abortion to obtain frozen funds.

Aside from the slew of lawsuits, New Haven has joined in the national effort against the federal deputization of municipal governments and a national crackdown on immigration. This January, New Haven signed onto an amicus brief backing Minnesota in its lawsuit against the officials who authorized the federal government's mass deportations.

Elicker doubled down on his effort to distance New Haven ideologically from the Trump administration at the swearing-in ceremony for city officials this year, emphasizing New Haven's values of "tolerance," "respect for diversity" and "compassion for our most vulnerable." He said that the Trump administration's haphazard funding cuts force city officials to remain vigilant.

Now, a year and a half since his first major action against the federal government, Elicker has continued to define his own ideological posture, as well as New Haven's, as antithetical to Trump's.

In his State of the City address this February, the mayor doubled down on his previous criticism of the Trump administration, calling it an "endless dumpster fire of chaos and cruelty."

Following the dispatch of federal agents to carry out Operation Broken Trust, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement roundup that resulted in the arrest of 65 immigrants across Connecticut, the Trump administration last month filed its own lawsuit against New Haven.

The Department of Justice complaint argued that New Haven's policies illegally restrict local authorities' collaboration with federal immigration enforcement, disregard federal law and threaten public safety. The suit, which also named Elicker, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont SOM '80 and Attorney General William Tong as defendants, criticized New Haven's enforcement of the Trust Act, which prevents the "deputization of local and state law enforcement for immigration enforcement."

A 2025 "Year in Review" message from Tong criticized the Trump administration's "cruel, dangerous, and hurtful agenda," adding that his office would not relent in its protection of Connecticut families.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, who represents New Haven in Congress, blasted Trump for "pursuing politically motivated lawsuits targeting our state for not carrying out ICE's extreme enforcement agenda."

"President Trump's actions are hurting working families, making it harder for them to afford basic necessities," DeLauro said in a statement sent to the News by a spokesperson. "We must fight back, and New Haven and Connecticut are leading the way by challenging the Trump administration's actions in court. Many of these cases have already been successful and restored funding to our communities."

In a phone interview with the News, Elicker said the city had been "prepared all along for a possible lawsuit" but emphasized New Haven's compliance with federal law. "We can see that similar Trump lawsuits across the nation have already been thrown out," the mayor said.

"Trump is trying to force us to settle and carry out immigration policy, but that is not our job," Elicker added.

Several of the city's legal challenges have already produced major rulings. One federal judge blocked the Trump administration from withholding federal funding from sanctuary jurisdictions, siding with New Haven, and another ordered the restoration of roughly $31 million in frozen environmental grants owed to the city, though the Trump administration has appealed portions of that ruling.

Some legal disputes remain unresolved, including the litigation over DHS grant conditions and broader fights surrounding immigration enforcement. Elicker seems to have no intentions of backing down. He said that his approach differs from those of his colleagues across Connecticut.

"Some have spoken out, but some have remained under the radar, and I don't think that's the right thing to do at this moment," Elicker said. "We have to fight for what we believe in."

The Department of Justice does not currently have a permanent attorney general.

*Elijah Hurewitz-Ravitch contributed reporting.*

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