

Race & Health Equity

Medical residents: ICE presence causing public health crisis, ‘constant anxiety’ that could become chronic

About 200 medical residents and other health workers gathered in downtown Minneapolis to demand that federal agents leave the state.

by **Deanna Pistono**

01/23/2026



People watch from the skyway during a news conference outside of the Hennepin County Medical Center Emergency Room on Friday, Jan. 23, 2026, in Minneapolis, Minn. Healthcare providers and union members gathered to denounce immigration and customs enforcement actions taking place in Minnesota hospitals. Credit: Ellen Schmidt/MinnPost/CatchLight Local/Report for America

For a few minutes in subzero temperatures on Friday, medical residents gathered outside the Hennepin County Medical Center for a “unity break” alongside other statewide unions to demand ICE officers get out of their hospitals and out of Minnesota.

“(ICE has) created a massive public health crisis for our state,” said Avalon Swenson, an internal medicine resident at a U of M clinic. “To be quite frank, they’ve created massive public health crises across several states.”

What this crisis looks like, Swenson explained in an interview, is a loss of care, as patients who need continuing treatment opt to stay home instead. Medications don’t get picked up. Chemotherapy appointments are missed.

[Related: How Twin Cities mental health advocates are responding to public health demands and trauma – again](#)

Those with at-risk pregnancies have gone into labor at home, “because of ICE,” said Zach Perez, a family medicine resident with Hennepin Healthcare.



Zach Perez, a resident physician at Hennepin Healthcare, chants during a news conference outside of the Hennepin County Medical Center Emergency Room on Friday, Jan. 23, 2026, in Minneapolis, Minn. Credit: Ellen Schmidt/MinnPost/CatchLight Local/Report for America

“This is an entirely preventable public health crisis that is caused by ICE,” Perez said into a microphone, while some 200 other medical residents and other health workers cheered in agreement. Perez called for leadership – elected officials, hospital administrators and business leaders in the state – to “work together...to rid our community of this disease.”

During an interview, Perez said what’s been happening with immigration enforcement in Minneapolis “ isn’t really about immigration.”

“It’s about retribution from this awful administration. They’re killing American citizens,” Perez said, referring to Renee Good’s shooting death by an ICE agent on Jan. 7. And federal agents are “causing legal immigrants to live in fear, and just treating undocumented immigrants inhumanely,” Perez said.

If ICE does not leave, the medical residents said communities’ health will worsen. People will continue not to seek treatment. And long-term conditions – which require repeated visits and care from medical professionals

— will become increasingly serious, potentially requiring more expensive care when these conditions become life-threatening.

Swenson also worries about the lingering effects of anxiety and trauma. Having started medical school after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, she says the current events feel all too familiar.

“To now essentially be in the same environment, but knowing that it’s our federal government doing this to us and we are not getting help – there’s a certain level of constant anxiety, just (a) baseline kind of fight or flight. When I think about the long-term health of Minnesotans, I really worry about that chronic level of anxiety and the impact it will have on our communities and our feeling of safety moving forward.”

Related: Q&A: Center for Victims of Torture’s Sara Nelson on supporting immigrants’ health amid fear and hostility

While patients are the first priority of medical residents, these same residents are not immune from the impact of ICE’s presence.

“I have colleagues who are immigrants, who are international medical graduates, (and) colleagues who are from the United States, but are folks of color,” Swenson said. “I’ve been watching my colleagues breaking down in the hallway because of the strain that is being put on them by the presence of ICE.”

This strain and this fear, she added, is unsustainable for providers and patients. Something has to change.

When asked what message he wanted the unity break to send, Perez didn’t mince words.

“ICE is a plague on this community, and they need to leave.”

Avalon Svenson, a resident physician at a University of Minnesota clinic, speaks during a news conference outside the Hennepin County Medical Center Emergency Room on Friday, Jan. 23, 2026, in Minneapolis, Minn. Health care providers and union members gathered to denounce immigration and customs enforcement actions taking place in Minnesota hospitals. Credit: Ellen Schmidt/MinnPost/CatchLight Local/Report for America

Editor's Note: Avalon Swenson's surname was previously misspelled in an earlier version of this story. It has since been corrected.

© 2026 MinnPost

Powered by Newspack