# Failures in asylum housing contributed to Colombian migrant’s death in Sussex hotel



In a tragic incident that underscores systemic failures within the asylum accommodation system, Victor Hugo Pereira Vargas, a 63-year-old Colombian migrant, was found dead in his hotel room at Boships Lions Farm in Hailsham, Sussex, on 13 October 2023. A coroner's ruling has highlighted that the staff at the hotel were inadequately trained to support vulnerable individuals, contributing to a dire lack of adequate care in what should be a compassionate environment.

Mr Pereira Vargas had arrived in the UK on 4 August 2023, claiming asylum shortly thereafter. His harrowing journey included a desperate attempt to leave the UK shortly before his death, during which he approached immigration officers at Gatwick Airport, asking to be placed on a flight back home. In the weeks leading up to his passing, he expressed fear about being deported to the Bibby Stockholm barge, describing it in distressing terms as a "maritime prison." This deepening anxiety was reportedly exacerbated by his perception that staff were ignoring his mental state, a sentiment echoed by fellow residents at the hotel who noted his increasingly erratic behaviour.

An inquest revealed alarming gaps in responsibility and oversight within the Home Office. Senior officials overseeing the hotel contract had no knowledge that the hotel’s staffing had been subcontracted to Crown Lodge Accommodation, which in turn had outsourced its staff to Becker Hoffman Facilities Management Limited. These layers of subcontracting appear to have muddied accountability and resulted in a workforce devoid of essential training in safeguarding and suicide awareness—a requirement under the terms of the £700 million contract managed by Clearsprings Ready Homes, the primary contractor for asylum accommodations in southern England. Recent findings suggest that this trend may reflect a broader issue; suicides among asylum seekers in Home Office accommodation have reportedly more than doubled, with 23 cases recorded since 2020.

Staffing deficiencies were starkly illustrated during the inquest, with one worker admitting to having received no formal training for the welfare checks they were mandated to conduct. This inadequacy came to light as the coroner scrutinised records, emphasising that much of Mr Pereira Vargas's distress went unnoticed by staff who failed to perform proper checks. Over the course of his stay, staff had logged that he had "no issues" despite resident testimony suggesting otherwise, with alarming behaviours being dismissed or overlooked entirely.

Assistant Coroner Michael Spencer noted that “it is possible these factors cumulatively contributed to [Mr Pereira Vargas’s] decline and death.” He lamented that even basic requests—like scheduling a mental health appointment requested by the deceased—were poorly managed, further deepening Mr Pereira Vargas's isolation and helplessness. His family’s solicitor stated that the Home Office must take responsibility for its failure to enforce training and support systems, and that this reflects a significant risk to life within the asylum system.

The implications of this tragic case resonate beyond the immediate loss of life. Dame Karen Bradley, chair of the home affairs select committee, expressed grave concerns regarding the oversight of asylum accommodation contracts, stating, “With that comes an expectation of high standards of support and proper oversight to ensure facilities are run correctly.”

In response to the incident, a Home Office spokesperson acknowledged the tragic nature of Mr Pereira Vargas's death and reiterated a commitment to the welfare of asylum seekers. However, the systemic failures highlighted by this case raise critical questions about the adequacy of current protocols and the training provided to those tasked with the care of some of society's most vulnerable individuals. The incident, and those preceding it, call for a thorough reevaluation of the asylum accommodation system, especially as the pattern of unaddressed mental health crises among asylum seekers becomes increasingly evident.

In conclusion, the tragic death of Victor Hugo Pereira Vargas serves as a painful reminder of the urgent need for reform within the asylum system, ensuring that those seeking refuge receive not just shelter, but compassionate care and support during their most vulnerable moments.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrant-hotel-asylum-seeker-colombia-b2750800.html), [[2]](https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/24009121.hailsham-asylum-seeker-killed-himself-home-office-hotel/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrant-hotel-asylum-seeker-colombia-b2750800.html), [[3]](https://www.inkl.com/news/suicides-of-asylum-seekers-in-home-office-accommodation-double-in-last-four-years)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/24009121.hailsham-asylum-seeker-killed-himself-home-office-hotel/), [[4]](https://www.inkl.com/news/the-forgotten-lives-lost-waiting-for-asylum-in-britain)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.inkl.com/news/suicides-of-asylum-seekers-in-home-office-accommodation-double-in-last-four-years), [[5]](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-05-13/ice-immigration-detention-deaths-sick-detainees)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrant-hotel-asylum-seeker-colombia-b2750800.html), [[6]](https://immigrationimpact.com/2021/03/26/unreported-covid-deaths-ice/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrant-hotel-asylum-seeker-colombia-b2750800.html), [[2]](https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/24009121.hailsham-asylum-seeker-killed-himself-home-office-hotel/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrant-hotel-asylum-seeker-colombia-b2750800.html), [[4]](https://www.inkl.com/news/the-forgotten-lives-lost-waiting-for-asylum-in-britain)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrant-hotel-asylum-seeker-colombia-b2750800.html), [[4]](https://www.inkl.com/news/the-forgotten-lives-lost-waiting-for-asylum-in-britain)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrant-hotel-asylum-seeker-colombia-b2750800.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/24009121.hailsham-asylum-seeker-killed-himself-home-office-hotel/> - An asylum seeker, Victor Hugo Pereira Vargas, 63, from Colombia, was found dead in his hotel room in Hailsham, East Sussex, on 13 October 2023. Documents suggest potential safeguarding failures, including missed signs of distress and inadequate staff training. The Home Office stated that any unexpected or suspicious death in asylum accommodation is investigated by the coroner and police in the same way as deaths among the general population. A spokesperson added: 'The welfare of asylum seekers is, and always will be, of the utmost importance to us.'
3. <https://www.inkl.com/news/suicides-of-asylum-seekers-in-home-office-accommodation-double-in-last-four-years> - Research indicates that 23 asylum seekers have died by suicide in Home Office accommodation between 2020 and 2023, more than doubling the total from the previous four years. The Home Office stated that any unexpected or suspicious death in asylum accommodation is investigated by the coroner and police in the same way as deaths among the general population. A spokesperson added: 'The welfare of asylum seekers is, and always will be, of the utmost importance to us.'
4. <https://www.inkl.com/news/the-forgotten-lives-lost-waiting-for-asylum-in-britain> - The Home Office stated that any unexpected or suspicious death in asylum accommodation is investigated by the coroner and police in the same way as deaths among the general population. A spokesperson added: 'The welfare of asylum seekers is, and always will be, of the utmost importance to us.'
5. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-05-13/ice-immigration-detention-deaths-sick-detainees> - An ACLU attorney said the case raises questions about whether immigration officials are undercounting detainee deaths during the pandemic by releasing people just before they die. Watchdog groups have urged Congress to investigate and publicize death reviews for people released from immigration custody just before they die, including during a 2019 House committee hearing on oversight of ICE detention three months after Medina Leon’s death. Advocates say quantifying how many cases like Medina Leon’s exist is difficult because ICE has historically refused to provide basic information about detainees who die just after being released from custody. In addition to Medina Leon, the ACLU lawsuit names Martin Vargas Arellano, Jose Ibarra Bucio and Teka Gulema, each of whom died soon after release. Vargas Arellano contracted COVID-19 at the Adelanto ICE Processing Facility in San Bernardino County and had a stroke. Washington said the judge declined to intervene, and Ndiaye remains on life support. Ten days passed after Vargas Arellano died before his lawyer learned about it by filing a missing-person’s report and calling the coroner’s office. A court-appointed investigation into his death led to a scathing special master’s report last July on the actions of ICE, Adelanto and its contract healthcare provider, Wellpath. The report notes that the decision to release Vargas Arellano while comatose and near death resulted in his being “moved off the ‘books’ at ICE.” “Because ICE released him to the hospital, all three were relieved of their obligations to report his death,” the report states. “Further, this seems to have been the sole purpose of the release.” ICE declined to comment on Arellano’s case and others reviewed by The Times. Dr. Marc Stern, a physician specializing in correctional healthcare who has served as an expert for the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, said that it may be more fiscally responsible to release someone from custody who is hospitalized. That way, he said, the government avoids spending taxpayer money on guards and paying medical bills that some hospitals already cover for low-income patients. But Stern said that flouting reporting requirements indicates there could also be a political motivation in ICE’s release of sick detainees. All deaths should be reported, he noted, particularly when someone’s health deteriorates under ICE’s watch. Image: Margaret Hellerstein, an attorney with Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project
6. <https://immigrationimpact.com/2021/03/26/unreported-covid-deaths-ice/> - An ACLU attorney said the case raises questions about whether immigration officials are undercounting detainee deaths during the pandemic by releasing people just before they die. Watchdog groups have urged Congress to investigate and publicize death reviews for people released from immigration custody just before they die, including during a 2019 House committee hearing on oversight of ICE detention three months after Medina Leon’s death. Advocates say quantifying how many cases like Medina Leon’s exist is difficult because ICE has historically refused to provide basic information about detainees who die just after being released from custody. In addition to Medina Leon, the ACLU lawsuit names Martin Vargas Arellano, Jose Ibarra Bucio and Teka Gulema, each of whom died soon after release. Vargas Arellano contracted COVID-19 at the Adelanto ICE Processing Facility in San Bernardino County and had a stroke. Washington said the judge declined to intervene, and Ndiaye remains on life support. Ten days passed after Vargas Arellano died before his lawyer learned about it by filing a missing-person’s report and calling the coroner’s office. A court-appointed investigation into his death led to a scathing special master’s report last July on the actions of ICE, Adelanto and its contract healthcare provider, Wellpath. The report notes that the decision to release Vargas Arellano while comatose and near death resulted in his being “moved off the ‘books’ at ICE.” “Because ICE released him to the hospital, all three were relieved of their obligations to report his death,” the report states. “Further, this seems to have been the sole purpose of the release.” ICE declined to comment on Arellano’s case and others reviewed by The Times. Dr. Marc Stern, a physician specializing in correctional healthcare who has served as an expert for the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, said that it may be more fiscally responsible to release someone from custody who is hospitalized. That way, he said, the government avoids spending taxpayer money on guards and paying medical bills that some hospitals already cover for low-income patients. But Stern said that flouting reporting requirements indicates there could also be a political motivation in ICE’s release of sick detainees. All deaths should be reported, he noted, particularly when someone’s health deteriorates under ICE’s watch. Image: Margaret Hellerstein, an attorney with Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project
7. <https://irr.org.uk/research/deaths/bame-refugee-and-migrant-deaths-in-custody-2014-2022/> - The Institute of Race Relations (IRR) has documented numerous deaths of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), refugee, and migrant individuals in immigration detention between 2014 and 2022. These cases highlight concerns about the treatment and conditions within detention facilities. For instance, in 2015, Thomas Kirungi, a 30-year-old Ugandan, died at The Verne Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) after his asylum claim was refused, with the inquest concluding suicide. In 2016, Amir Siman Tov, a Moroccan in Colnbrook IRC, was found dead despite being on suicide watch, with the inquest recording a misadventure verdict and criticizing the lack of proper medical care. These cases underscore the need for improved oversight and care within immigration detention facilities.