# Irish woman Cliona Ward released from US immigration custody after 17 days, reigniting debate on strict enforcement



# Cliona Ward's Release from US Immigration Custody Sparks Renewed Debate on Immigration Policies

An Irish woman, Cliona Ward, has been released from US immigration custody after enduring a harrowing 17 days behind bars. This ordeal stemmed from a nearly two-decade-old criminal record, highlighting the often perplexing and contentious nature of immigration enforcement in the United States. Ward, 54, who has legally resided in the US for decades, was detained at San Francisco International Airport upon her return from a visit to her ill father in Ireland on April 21.

The circumstances surrounding her detention have ignited widespread concern in both Ireland and the US, leading to a robust campaign for her release. A pivotal moment came when a California judge agreed to overturn Ward's historical convictions at the federal level, a decision that facilitated her release, as confirmed by her legal team. Ward's situation underscores the startling reality that individuals can be significantly impacted by long-past misdemeanours, particularly in the current political climate, where immigration policies have become increasingly stringent.

Following her release, Ward emerged from an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility in Tacoma, Washington, emotionally overwhelmed yet relieved. In a touching reflection, her sister Orla Holladay shared on a crowdfunder page that "Cliona is finally in her own bed" and expressed deep gratitude for the support received during this tumultuous period. Ward's first act upon returning home was to "jump on the bed and hug the pillows," a testament to her emotional recovery, juxtaposed against the trauma she experienced. She also voiced her fears for other women still detained, indicating the grim reality faced by numerous individuals in similar situations.

Ward's story resonates within a larger narrative about US immigration enforcement, particularly in light of the controversial policies instituted during Donald Trump's tenure, which aimed to intensify deportation efforts. While Trump's administration focused heavily on undocumented immigrants, cases like Ward's reveal how documented individuals—those with visas or green cards—also find themselves ensnared in the net of strict regulations. This rising scrutiny has sparked fears not only among immigrants but also among potential visitors to the US.

Recent statistics showcase a troubling trend; reports indicate that there has been an 11.6% drop in overseas visitors to the US as of March this year, with an even steeper decline of 17.2% in visitors from Western Europe. Such figures suggest that the tightening grip of immigration enforcement is not just affecting those with uncertain legal statuses but also deterring legitimate travellers from entering the country.

Amid these broader concerns, high-profile cases continue to draw attention. For instance, Jasmine Mooney, a Canadian national, faced a two-week detention due to complications with her work visa, while British graphic artist Rebecca Burke was held for three weeks under similar circumstances. These instances highlight the potential repercussions of even minor bureaucratic missteps in the increasingly complex immigration landscape.

Ward's experience has not only ignited discussions around immigration reform but has also brought awareness to the support networks that emerge in response to such crises. Voices from both sides of the Atlantic, including Ireland's Taoiseach Micheál Martin, have expressed solidarity, emphasising the importance of compassion and understanding in addressing immigration-related issues. Ward's lawyer, Erin Hall, articulated the collective relief shared by all involved, marking her release as a significant victory against the backdrop of an often unyielding immigration system.

As Cliona Ward returns to her life in the US, where she works at a non-profit and cares for her chronically ill son who is a US citizen, her story serves as a stark reminder of the human impacts of immigration policies. It highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of how such laws affect individuals with deep roots in their communities, urging policymakers to reconsider the balance between enforcement and compassion in America’s immigration landscape.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/08/irish-woman-cliona-ward-detained-us-immigration-released-17-days-custody), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/08/irish-woman-cliona-ward-detained-us-immigration-released-17-days-custody)
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2. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/08/irish-woman-cliona-ward-detained-us-immigration-released-17-days-custody> - An Irish woman, Cliona Ward, was detained by US immigration authorities due to a nearly 20-year-old criminal record. She was released after 17 days in custody. Ward, 54, had lived legally in the US for decades and was detained at San Francisco airport on April 21 after visiting her sick father in Ireland. A California judge recently agreed to overturn her original convictions at the federal level, leading to her release. Ward expressed gratitude for the support received during her ordeal.
3. <https://www.irishcentral.com/news/irishwoman-cliona-ward-released-immigration-detention> - Cliona Ward, an Irish woman detained by US immigration authorities due to a decades-old criminal record, has been released after 17 days in custody. Ward, 54, had been living legally in the US for years and was detained at San Francisco airport on April 21 after visiting her ill father in Ireland. A California judge recently agreed to overturn her original convictions at the federal level, facilitating her release. Ward expressed deep gratitude for the support she received during her detention.
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