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WISCONSIN GAVE HIM A BADGE. ICE PUT HIM BEHIND BARS.

ICE detains a Wisconsin State Trooper who came here legally as a child and chose a career protecting the public

JUNEAU, Wis. — November 5, 2026 — Carel Aaron Van Der Merwe wanted to serve the United States. When his pending immigration status prevented him from joining the military, he chose law enforcement. He graduated from the New Mexico Military Institute with a degree in criminal justice and became a Wisconsin State Trooper, serving honorably for nearly a year.

The 21-year-old lives in Onalaska and works out of Tomah. The federal government authorized him to work. Wisconsin entrusted him to protect the public.

Now, ICE is holding him in immigration detention in Dodge County.

Van Der Merwe came to the United States legally from South Africa as a child. According to his family, he and his parents followed the legal process and have waited seven years for an asylum interview. He is included on his father's pending asylum application and holds federal work authorization bearing an expiration date in 2030.

When ICE officers approached him while he waited to board a domestic flight, he explained that he had a work permit and a pending asylum application. According to Van Der Merwe, the officers said they did not care, placed him in handcuffs and shackles, and transported him to immigration detention in Dodge County.

ICE says it is going after people who break the law. Here, it has detained someone whose job is to uphold it.

"Carel came here legally as a child. His family pursued asylum through the legal process. He holds federal work authorization and serves Wisconsin as a State Trooper," said his attorney, Marc Christopher of Christopher & De Leon Law Office. "Now the same government that authorized him to work has locked him up."

Wisconsin State Patrol hiring requirements expressly permit noncitizens with valid work authorization to serve.

"ICE did not have to detain him. He is neither a threat nor a flight risk," Christopher said. "He has a home, a career, and a community he serves. How does putting him behind bars make Wisconsin safer?"

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"This is inhumane and despicable," Christopher said. "Putting a Wisconsin State Trooper behind bars while his asylum case sits unresolved does not make our communities safer. Wisconsin's congressional delegation should demand his release and demand answers."

Christopher will seek Van Der Merwe's release on bond, which is likely to take two weeks. He calls on DHS to support his immediate release and on Wisconsin's congressional delegation to scrutinize the decision to detain him.

For seven years, he has waited for the government to do its job. He should be free to do his.

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