

Drop the Charges! Stand for Etel Haxhiaj

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Etel Haxhiaj?

Etel Haxhiaj is a mother, a long-time community organizer in Worcester, and a two-term elected official. She fled Albania as a teen with her parents to Greece due to civil unrest. As an undocumented refugee in Greece, she watched many other immigrants and refugees live under the fear of deportation. Her own father was detained in a police raid while going to work due to his undocumented status. She immigrated to the United States in 1999 and became an American citizen in 2005. She has worked locally, statewide, and nationally on housing and homelessness, and has dedicated most of her life to advocating for immigrant rights, racial justice, and a livable climate. In 2021, she became the first Albanian-born immigrant elected to the Worcester City Council, where she was an outspoken advocate for police transparency and accountability, housing affordability, and homelessness prevention.



What happened in Worcester?

On May 8, 2025, a confrontation erupted on Eureka Street in Worcester, Massachusetts, when ICE agents detained a woman in a residential neighborhood as her 16-year-old daughter — who had her own young baby with her — clung to her and pleaded for her release. The ICE agents did not identify themselves or produce a valid warrant.

The Worcester Police were present throughout the incident. Witnesses and video footage show the mother crying and resisting being separated from her family, while a group of community members passionately clamored for ICE to stop. The teenage daughter, distraught and in crisis, attempted to stand in front of the ICE vehicle and kicked it at one point. Rather than attempting to support this vulnerable youth and de-escalate the situation, the Worcester Police took the teen down to the ground, held her face to the pavement, and then arrested her.

The incident drew neighbors and immigrant-rights advocates into the street, including City Councilor Etel Haxhiaj and community activist (and School Committee candidate) Ashley Spring, who sought to intervene and de-escalate the situation by questioning the agents' authority and urging calm.



Tensions escalated as local police formed a line around ICE vehicles, and multiple people were shoved or restrained amid shouting and confusion. Video footage of the incident, shared widely on social media, shows a group of residents passionately objecting to the actions against this family. Etel can be seen trying to de-escalate the situation and advocating with the Worcester



Police, who had previously assured the City Council that they were not cooperating with ICE. Witnesses at the scene allege that the Worcester Police actively facilitated ICE's capture of the mother.

In the days that followed, Haxhiaj and Spring were charged with offenses including interfering with police and assault and battery on an officer, prompting public outrage, protests, and a broader debate about the conduct of ICE, the use of force against a family with a child present, and the decision to prosecute those who tried to intervene peacefully.

The Prosecution

Shortly after the May 8 incident, Etel was sent a summons for two charges of Assault and Battery on a Police Officer (ABPO) and one for Interference with Police. The Clerk Magistrate dropped one ABPO because the police could not produce video evidence of an assault. The Clerk Magistrate, however, reprimanded Etel for advocating for her constituents and stated that the bar for Etel, as an elected official, was higher than a regular member of the public. In the months that followed, Etel and her attorney filed a motion to dismiss the charges, but it was denied.

Shortly after bringing the charges, Worcester DA Joseph Early Jr. recused himself, citing a conflict of interest stemming from his office's close working relationship with the Worcester police officers involved in the incident. The case was then reassigned to the Northwestern District Attorney's Office to act as special prosecutor. ADA Steven Gagney from the Northwestern DA's office is the lead prosecutor on the case, which is being tried in Worcester District Court. The prosecution is proceeding amid sustained public controversy and calls to drop the charges, with critics arguing that video evidence shows Haxhiaj attempting to de-escalate the situation rather than threaten public safety.



The [Worcester Police Patrol Officers' Union](#) moved quickly and publicly to call for an ethics investigation and prosecution of Ms. Haxhiaj. The union president, Thomas Duffy (who reportedly has a personnel record including 27 internal investigations and 15 allegations of using unreasonable force), has been the most vocal critic of Ms. Haxhiaj. The union has amplified police narratives of the encounter and opposed calls for accountability or de-escalation reforms, while ICE and the union together have helped shape a public response

that emphasizes enforcement and prosecution rather than scrutiny of the treatment of the family or the officers' use of force. Prior to this incident, Councilor Haxhiaj was a frequent target of the police union for her outspokenness regarding the Department of Justice report on the Worcester Police Department and her advocacy for police transparency and accountability. As a result of this prosecution and smear campaign, Etel Haxhiaj lost her re-election bid to the City Council, losing by 300 votes.

Etel Haxhiaj has maintained her innocence and continues to do so. She has chosen to proceed to a jury trial and fight these charges before a jury of her peers. The trial is set to begin on February 10. The minimum mandatory sentencing is **90 days** in the House of Corrections if convicted of the charges.

Why Should Etel Be Cleared of Charges?

The public is clamoring for their elected officials to stand up to authoritarianism and oppose ICE misconduct. Etel showed up on May 8 to represent her constituents and support her community. Her presence and actions were no different than the actions taken by the growing list of public officials who have been targeted by the criminal justice system for standing up to ICE injustice: Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, NJ Congresswoman LaMonica McIver, CA Senator Alex Padilla, NYC City Comptroller Brad Lander, NY State Senator Julia Salazar, NYC Assemblywoman Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas.

Justice is supposed to be blind--applied impartially and without bias. Yet the prosecution of Etel Haxhiaj bears all the hallmarks of **selective and retaliatory prosecution**, using the criminal justice system to punish a vocal critic of the Worcester Police Department and to chill dissent.

Over two dozen residents were present and protested on Eureka Street that day. [Charges were filed against the 16-year-old girl, but were dropped in response to community criticism](#). The only people facing ongoing criminal charges are two public figures: Etel Haxhiaj and another individual who was seeking public office. The claim that Etel uniquely interfered with police activity or assaulted an officer is weak at best and unsupported by the video evidence, relying instead on testimony from officers who have demonstrated hostility toward her because of her advocacy. The prosecution has even acknowledged that Etel is being treated differently — and held to a higher standard — precisely because she is a public figure. The criminal justice system must not be used as a tool of political retaliation or to silence those who speak out against official misconduct.

The prosecution of Etel has been compromised from the outset by political interference from the Worcester Police Department and its union, which moved quickly to frame the Eureka Street incident as a criminal matter and to target a longtime activist and critic of police and ICE practices. Rather than allowing an impartial assessment of the facts, the union helped shape a narrative that treated her advocacy as misconduct, creating the appearance that the criminal justice system was being used to settle political scores. That taint did not disappear when the case was transferred after the Worcester DA's recusal; it merely shifted venues. The Northwestern District Attorney's Office, as Special Prosecutor, now has an independent obligation to evaluate whether this case serves justice or simply perpetuates a politically driven effort to punish dissent. It should not allow its authority to be enlisted in an unjust and unreasonable witch hunt born of pressure from local law enforcement and its union, but instead exercise its discretion to end a prosecution that undermines public confidence in fairness and equal justice under law.

The events of recent months have fundamentally changed the legal and civic context in which Etel Haxhiaj's actions must be understood. Across the country, thousands of ordinary residents — along with mayors, city councilors, and members of Congress — have publicly confronted, questioned, and protested ICE operations they believed to be abusive, unlawful, or dangerous.

What once may have been characterized as isolated interference now reflects a widespread and constitutionally protected pattern of civic response to controversial federal enforcement practices. In this new landscape, Etel's conduct was neither unique nor aberrant; it mirrored the actions of countless others who sought to de-escalate volatile situations and demand accountability from authorities.

Etel, as an immigrant social justice advocate, should not be used as a scapegoat to appease the police union and to justify the Worcester Police's aggressive role in the Eureka Street incident. To single her out for criminal punishment does not promote public safety or legal consistency, but instead transforms her into a symbolic target of retribution for dissent — a result incompatible with equal justice and the evolving national recognition that public officials and citizens alike have a legitimate role in challenging government misconduct.

Does the Assistant District Attorney (ADA) have the authority to drop the charges?

Yes. In Massachusetts, the ADA assigned to a case exercises broad **prosecutorial discretion**, meaning they have the legal authority to decide whether continuing a prosecution serves the interests of justice. This discretion includes the power to **dismiss charges at any stage** if the evidence is insufficient, witnesses are unreliable, constitutional concerns exist, or prosecution would be unfair or counterproductive. The ADA may enter a *nolle prosequi* (a formal decision not to proceed), move to dismiss in court, or decline to pursue the case further based on a reassessment of the facts and public interest. Prosecutors are not required to proceed simply because charges were initially filed; rather, they are ethically obligated to seek justice, not merely convictions. In a case where video evidence, community impact, and questions of selective or retaliatory prosecution are present, the ADA has both the authority and the responsibility to end the case if continuing it would undermine confidence in the fairness and integrity of the justice system

Who is the Drop the Charges Coalition?

The call to drop the charges against Etel Haxhiaj is being raised by a broad coalition of pro-democracy and social justice groups, including Worcester Indivisible, Indivisible Northampton-Swing Left Western Mass, Franklin County Continuing the Political Revolution, Indivisible West Quabbin, Standing Up for Racial Justice - Worcester, Refuse Fascism, Independent Socialist Group, Chelmsford Connected, Indivisible Westford, Indivisible Lowell, Nashoba Indivisible, Indivisible Acton Area, Indivisible Fitchburg, Indivisible First Middlesex, Wachusett-Watatic Indivisible Network, Greater Haverhill Indivisible, Concord Indivisible, Party for Socialism and Liberation, Care Action, Tyngsboro Indivisible, MassGreens Green-Rainbow Party, Indivisible Grafton, Greater Assabet Indivisible Network, Westborough Indivisible.

['Harrowing': Video shows Worcester police hold girl's face on ground during ICE operation.](#)

[NBC10: YouTube Video Footage](#)

['Fed Up' crowd in Massachusetts swarms ICE agents attempting to arrest mother](#)

[City Councilors, NAACP Hold Press Conference on ICE Seizure](#)

['Deeply troubling': Community members demand answers after Eureka Street ICE arrest](#)

NYT: A Councilwoman Intervened During an ICE Arrest. Then She Faced the Voters.



