

For-profit immigrant family detention center planned in Texas

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Included in the official US response to the “humanitarian crisis” of unaccompanied children fleeing violence and poverty in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, is the proposal to create a new for-profit family detention center for jailing the children and their families in Texas. The center, along with other planned detention facilities, is meant to hold the refugees as the Obama administration prepares to fast track their deportations.

According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the agency is working to “finalize contracts with construction and service providers.” In typical fashion, the agency has refused to release much information as to when the facility will open or how much it will cost.

The new facility will cover 50 acres of land in the town of Dilley, Texas, and is expected to have up to 2,400 beds. The creation of the grotesquely named “South Texas Family Detention Center” will double the existing federal capacity to house immigrant families.

The *Texas Observer* reports that the property is located on the Sendero Ranch, a “workforce housing community” for oilfield workers. The ranch is owned by Koontz McCombs, a commercial real estate firm which is leasing the camp to ICE.

More than 52,000 unaccompanied minors have been detained throughout the Southwest this year. The Pew Research Center recently obtained a US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) document which found that “many Guatemalan children come from rural areas, indicating they are probably seeking economic opportunities in the US. Salvadoran and Honduran children, on the other hand, come from extremely violent regions where they probably perceive the risk of traveling alone to the U.S. preferable to remaining at home.”

These children are fleeing violence that has been

perpetuated by the United States’ “war on drugs,” and before that, decades of military intervention. Honduras suffered from the world’s highest murder rate in 2014.

Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, stated bluntly the nature of the Obama administration’s response to these refugees: “In the face of unprecedented levels of illegal migration of adults with children and unaccompanied children in the Rio Grande Valley, we have reiterated that our borders are not open to illegal migration; if you come here illegally, and don’t have a legal basis to stay under our laws, we will send you back.”

In July, an open letter to Jeh Johnson, signed by more than 100 criminal justice, legal, immigrant and children’s rights organizations expressed their concern over family detention centers: “Family detention profoundly impacts the emotional and physical well-being of children and breaks down family relationships. While the administration is understandably under pressure to respond to the current humanitarian crisis at the border, locking babies in prison cells and deporting women and young children to dangerous situations is not the solution.”

The new facility is expected to be run by Corrections Corporation of America -- the world’s largest private prison company. Latest figures show that the company has the largest market share of the \$3 billion private prison industry, operating more than 60 detention centers and facilities across the country. Over half of the detained immigrants in the US are in facilities run by for-profit prison corporations, compared to just 8 percent of state and federal prisoners.

For-profit prison companies reap additional profits by “leasing” inmates to corporations like HP, IBM, and AT&T (to name just a few) for as little as 17 cents an hour for cheap labor.

While undocumented immigrants are criminalized for seeking to work in the US, these same companies exploit them as slave labor in carrying out core functions inside the facilities in which they are held, from cooking to cleaning, washing laundry and other tasks. Those who perform such work are “paid” with as little as cans of soda or candy bars, while those who refuse can be punished with solitary confinement or worse. It is unknown whether the new facility will end up exploiting immigrant families in a similar fashion.

Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) has a history of allegations of abuse and violence at former facilities. The most notorious was the T. Don Hutto Residential Center, where in 2007, the ACLU and the University of Texas Immigration Law Clinic won a settlement with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency that forced a halt to the facility housing immigrant families.

The Obama administration was compelled to remove families from the center two years later. It was reported that children at the center were forced to wear prison uniforms, given limited time outdoors and not provided education or medical service. Most children were locked in their cell of up to twelve hours a day. It was then converted into an all-female detention center.

The company has also faced lawsuits in Idaho and Ohio over allegations of violence, poor staffing and contract fraud. “Corrections Corporation of America does not have child welfare experience, and they should not be detaining children,” Barbara Hines, co-director of the UT Immigration Law Clinic, told *The Washington Post*.

Despite the allegations and lawsuits against CCA, ICE officials have praised the new facility. The agency has claimed that it will ensure “that family detention facilities operate in an open environment that includes play rooms, social workers, medical care, and classrooms with state-certified teachers and bilingual teachers.”

There should be no illusions as to the true nature of these detention centers and the lack of proper treatment that these immigrant families will receive.

Bob Libal, executive director of Grassroots Leadership, a group advocating against for-profit prisons, told *The Texas Observer*, “Given the shameful history of family detention at Hutto, it’s beyond troubling that ICE would turn back to Corrections

Corporation of America to operate what would be by far the nation’s largest family detention center. While little kids and their families will suffer in this remote private prison, far away from legal or social services, this multi-billion-dollar private prison company stands to make enormous profits.”

The proposal for the creation of the new family detention center follows by only three months the opening of similar facilities elsewhere. In Karnes City, Texas, a previously all-male detention center is now able to accept more than 530 women and children, and in Artesia, New Mexico, a former law enforcement training center can now hold up to 650 detainees.

Last month, immigration officials refused to release a seven-year-old Salvadoran girl from Karnes City to El Salvador to receive treatment for a life-threatening cancer. Only under public pressure was the facility willing to release the girl and her mother. The Karnes facility was hailed in 2012 when it opened as a “humane” detention center.

Attorneys working at the Artesia facility in New Mexico were also reporting deplorable conditions and efforts by the immigration officials to deport as many families as possible.

It was reported in 2013, that a US congressional directive known as the “bed mandate” sets a quota for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to hold an average of 34,000 immigrants in custody per day. Under this congressional directive, the number of immigrants being jailed and deported has reached record highs over the past five years.

Indeed, the Obama administration has deported more immigrants than any other administration in US history. Far from being “progressive” when it comes to immigration (or any other major issue), Obama has only continued and deepened the hated policies of the previous Bush Administration.



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