

Allegations of sexual abuse at south Texas immigrant detention facility

Jake Dean
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Attorneys representing women being held at an immigrant detention facility in the southern Texas city of Karnes City have filed a federal complaint against at least three Karnes County Residential Center employees for allegations of sexual abuse and harassment.

The women, whose children are also detained at the facility, told two civil-rights organizations and a San Antonio-law based firm, Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), that they were removed from their cells at night to have sex with the guards and other support personnel.

The complaint was filed Tuesday by attorneys from MALDEF, the Immigration Rights and Civil Rights Clinics at the University of Texas Law School and the Javier N. Maldonado law firm to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which is overseen by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

According to the complaint, the guards and staff would call the women their “girlfriends,” or “novias,” and would kiss, fondle and grope them in front of other detainees, including children. The women also stated that they were promised money and legal assistance with their pending immigration case in exchange for sexual favors.

Two other detainees at the facility witnessed incidents of abuse and had reported them to the facility’s staff. It is still unclear whether the reports have been made available to federal officials or only seen by the GEO Group, the private company that runs the facility. Lawyers from MALDEF have stated that guards and other personnel have free access to the detention cells at any time of the day and separate the mothers from the children in different sleeping quarters without any explanation or warning, making it easier to sexually abuse the women.

The facility, once an all-male detention center, was transformed into a family detention facility along with another in Artesia, New Mexico this summer, as waves of immigrants from Central and South America were escaping violence and rampant poverty from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. They are currently being held in “family detention facilities” as Congress prepares legal justification for an increase in the already historically high number of deportations.

According to lawyers from MALDEF, the facility is not licensed under Texas child welfare standards, making any sort of state oversight impossible.

Adelina Pruneda, spokesperson for ICE and DHS, responding to the allegations in typical hypocritical fashion stated that federal officials remain “committed to ensuring all individuals in our custody are housed and treated in a safe, secure and humane manner.”

“ICE has a zero-tolerance policy for all forms of sexual abuse or assault and our facilities are maintained in accordance with applicable laws and policies,” Pruneda continued. “Accusations of alleged unlawful conduct are investigated thoroughly and if substantiated, appropriate action is taken.”

In fact, anything approaching a “thorough investigation” is rarely ever made into allegations of the abuse of immigrant detainees. An American Immigration Council report in spring 2014 analyzed over 800 complaints filed against Border Patrol misconduct. The report found that between January 2009 and January 2012, more than 97 percent of all complaints that were addressed by internal investigators were deemed to have “No Action Taken.” Not even an oral reprimand or written reports were issued against the agents. The GEO Group, Inc. operates the Karnes County Residential Center under an internal service agreement with ICE. Founded in

1984, the company's official goal is to "help our clients serve those assigned to their care through a wide range of diversified services including the design, construction and financing of state and federal prisons, detention centers, community reentry facilities, and other special needs institutions as well as the provision of community supervision services, with cutting-edge electronic monitoring technologies."

In other words, they serve as an extension of the state, no less ruthless is their hostility towards immigrants and contempt for the most basic democratic rights.

The Obama administration and Congress are working to construct the largest family detention facility in south Texas; it is expected to have up to 2,400 beds. The creation of such a horrid facility will double the existing federal capacity for detaining immigrant families.

According to GEO spokesman Pablo Paez, "The Karnes County Residential Center provides a safe, clean, and family friendly environment for mothers and children awaiting required processing by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. The center provides high-quality care, and our company strongly denies allegation to the contrary."

A brief review shows that GEO does not provide women and their children with a "safe, clean and family friendly environment":

- Between 2005 and 2009, at least eight detainees died at the George W. Hill Correctional Facility in Delaware, Pennsylvania.
- In 2009, detainees rioted at the Reeves County Detention Center in response to the death of a detainee, inhumane treatment and lack of medical treatment.
- In 2007, seven employees at the Texas Youth Commission were fired for having failed to report the squalid conditions that the children were living in.
- Plaintiffs filed a lawsuit against the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility in November 2010 stating that prison authorities allowed abuses and negligence to occur at the facility.

The list of allegations of harassment, sexual assault, civil rights violations and violence at GEO Group Facilities is extensive and points to the failure of the capitalist system to provide even the most basic necessities of life.

In 2011, the American Civil Liberties Union found that more than 180 sexual abuse complaints in

immigrant detention centers have been made since 2007. Human Rights Watch reported in August 2010 that over 50 allegations of sexual abuse or harassment in immigrant centers have been complied since the formation of ICE in 2003.

These figures wholly underestimate the actual number of sexual and violent assaults, and do not take into account verbal and other psychological trauma that are more commonplace in these deplorable facilities. Sexual and violent abuse runs more rampant in these facilities than what is actually reported. Sexual abuse often goes unreported out of fear of retaliation by guards and other personnel.

Violence is not isolated to detention facilities, but is prevalent at the border as well. Independent research by *The Republic* found that Customs and Border Protection officers have killed at least 45 people since 2005, including at least 13 American citizens.

The Obama administration has continued and deepened the reactionary policies of the George W. Bush administration. Last year alone Obama oversaw the deportation of a record 438,421 people.



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