Iraq war contractor ran US detention centre for immigrant children

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The "war on terror" has now come home in the form of the US government's war against immigrants. A report released last week by Reveal, the website of the Center for Investigative Reporting, exposed the existence of a detention facility for immigrant children run by private defense contractor MVM.

The children were held in a large, vacant office building close to downtown Phoenix, Arizona. MVM, a Virginia-based company founded by three former Secret Service agents, at one time supplied guards for CIA-run prisons in Iraq.

Since 2014, the company has received contracts worth nearly $248 million, ostensibly to transport immigrant children. However, cell phone video footage recorded by concerned neighbors shows that MVM actually detained children in the Phoenix office building during the three weeks when the Trump administration was openly pursuing a policy of separately detaining all children from families arrested at the US-Mexico border.

Lianna Dunlap, a 25-year-old teaching assistant for children with autism, began recording the video footage when she saw white vans filled with dazed-looking children being unloaded into the formerly vacant office building for the second day in a row in early June. Some were so young, they had to be carried into the facility.

The few voices she could hear made it clear that the children were Spanish-speakers. Initially concerned that the children were being trafficked, Dunlap soon began to suspect that what she was witnessing was the detention of children who had been torn from their parents at the border under Trump's "zero tolerance policy."

Kristen Brown, another neighbor, also noticed that once brought in, children were never seen outside. Brown, herself a mother of an active two-year-old, told Reveal that she became worried about the lack of space and facilities for children inside the building. Brown then reached out to an on-site worker, telling him that "as a mom, it does not feel right … there are 40 kids in that place." She added that she did not know what was being done with the children.

Concerned neighbors who tried to talk to the few on-site workers met with terse replies, if any. None saw the children outside the facility after they had been brought in. However, they did see food and water being brought in.

Three weeks after the first vans were sighted, Dunlap and others noticed the presence of five unmarked white vans to take the children away. The timing coincided with Trump's executive order back-pedaling on family separations.

When her efforts to record the process were blocked by workers who moved the vans, Dunlap and her husband confronted them. They were told they could call the police, which they did. When the Phoenix police arrived at the building, they were informed that "MVM was contracted to perform that transport."

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) spokesperson Jennifer Elzea confirmed to Reveal the existence of the contract, stating that MVM "is authorized to use their office spaces as waiting areas for minors awaiting same-day transportation between US Customs and Border Protection custody and US Health and Human Services custody." These spaces, Elzea claimed, provided the children "a more comfortable and private atmosphere" as compared to "public transportation hubs."

MVM has claimed publicly that it does not operate "shelters or any other type of housing." It is, however, a matter of public record that the company has held the

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lease for the Phoenix office building since shortly before Attorney General Jeff Sessions' announcement of family separations under the "zero tolerance" policy.

When confronted with the fact that neighbors had video footage of children being taken into that facility, MVM claimed that it was a "temporary holding place" for children being flown to other locations. A company spokesperson insisted that the space was intended to hold children for a few hours before flights, but admitted that she was unsure how long the children ended up staying.

Apart from the testimony of the neighbors, Reveal reporters spotted objects including an inflatable mattress, a box marked "baby shampoo" and a medication schedule that made it apparent the building was, in fact, being used as a detention facility.

The Phoenix office building is not listed among the official shelters operated by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Moreover, even if one took for good coin the claims of ICE and MVM about the Phoenix facility being merely a more comfortable transit center for children, it would not alter the fact that its use for such a purpose might be illegal under state law. The building, which has no kitchen, few toilets and only dark windows, is not licensed by Arizona to operate as a facility in which children are held or cared for. Such a license, as per the Arizona Department of Health Services, would require "qualified staff, outdoor play areas, age-appropriate toys, smoke detectors, a food establishment permit and other government health and safety inspections."

Just last year, MVM was awarded a five-year contract worth $8 million by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the agency in charge of housing unaccompanied immigrant children, to "maintain readiness" and provide "emergency services." Such services evidently include the running of unregulated and secret detention centers.

There is no reliable answer to the question of how many such facilities exist. The existence of this detention center was exposed only due to the actions of concerned citizens.

Brown, the neighbor who tried to obtain answers about the treatment of the children, was told by a worker that there was at least one other such facility run by the same company. MVM has refused to answer questions about how many such facilities it operates around the country.

Much like the CIA black sites operated under the veil of the "war on terror," detention centers in this on-going war against immigrants operate outside of all accepted human rights norms and democratic oversight.

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