

Virginia's Democratic governor seeks to whitewash abuse of immigrant youth at state detention facility

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A report issued last week by Virginia state government seeks to whitewash the criminal abuse of unaccompanied immigrant children detained in the United States and held at the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center (SVJC) in northwest Virginia from 2014 through 2017.

Governor Ralph Northam, elected last year as part of a wave of Democratic Party victories that were presented in the media as a rebuke to the Trump administration, has effectively provided political cover for the criminal policies of the right-wing president.

The plight of dozens of immigrant youth at the juvenile detention facility first became known in June when a lawsuit detailing the conditions at SVJC and a similar center in Texas emerged. The lawsuit, filed last year by the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, accuses detention officials of "excessive, abusive, and irreparably punitive and disciplinary practices and denial of adequate mental health care" that subjects children to "physical, emotional and psychological damage, in violation of fundamental constitutional norms."

The staff of the two facilities were accused of:

- physically beating or striking children, often for minor infractions
- engaging in psychological abuse, including solitary confinement for weeks at a time
- calling children racial slurs and using other abusive language

- placing children as young as 14 years old in restraining chairs in which their arms, waists and legs were bound for days at a time

- stripping some children of their clothing forcibly, before putting them in harnesses

- placing a mesh "spit mask" on detainees, leading many children to believe they were being suffocated by the guards

- forcibly drugging children as young as 9 years old with antipsychotic and antidepressant medication, without permission from either the children or their parents.

In addition, youth were denied adequate meals, not informed of their rights and often denied the ability to appeal their treatment, which is referred to in the lawsuit as "torture."

The revelation of brutal treatment of immigrant youth inside state detention centers is an indictment of the policies of both Democratic President Barack Obama as well as Republican President Donald Trump, as well as numerous state and local political figures. The governor of Virginia during the period covered by the lawsuit was Democrat Terry McAuliffe, a former chair of the Democratic National Committee, a close ally of Hillary Clinton, and a potential candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020.

The Virginia state report, overseen by Secretary for Public Safety and Homeland Security Brian J. Moran

and conducted by the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice and Department of Social Services, is a flagrant cover-up. Within the first paragraphs, the “study” states: “The DJJ [Department of Juvenile Justice] team found SVJC in compliance with applicable regulations and certification standards” and thus “no evidence of abuse or neglect” was found.

Using language intended to downplay the actions of officials at the SVJC, the report states: “SVJC operational tenets are geared more toward a correctional philosophy and environment than a therapeutic model,” suggesting the facility hire more staff with backgrounds in “cognitive behavioral interventions and trauma informed care.”

Elsewhere, the review suggests that, “given the concerns raised by the allegations ... about physical restraints more generally ... DJJ will inform and educate the Board about their use in Virginia in order that the Board may properly consider the current regulations and whether any changes might be necessary.” While the report mentions that several staff members faced discipline for inappropriate use of restraints, it fails to explain the nature of the violations or if they had resulted in any injuries to the minors.

The report reveals that the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which is responsible for the children, refused to allow DJJ investigators to take notes about or copy any case files for children held in the facility at any time. State investigators also could not question current detainees without an “SVJC staff member ... present for all interviews.” Unsurprisingly, the report finds: “No residents interviewed had knowledge of the use of the restraint chair” or any other such torture methods.

In addition, the youth who originally had been included in the federal class action lawsuit had been deported or transferred to a different facility prior to the investigation.

Governor Northam praised the findings: “I applaud the quick and comprehensive examination conducted by the Department of Juvenile Justice and the Department of Social Services, and encourage the facility to heed their recommendations ... The safety of every child being held there is of the utmost importance.” Spokespeople for SVJC issued a statement praising the conclusions and stating the facility “embraces the recommendations of the report.”

Spokespeople for the Washington Lawyers’ Committee called the report “deeply flawed,” noting that children were interviewed without having lawyers present and that the investigators had declined to contact the children’s legal representatives, despite the “ample evidence produced” by their research and that of expert witnesses.

The whitewashing of abuse and torment of children by state officials occurs as the Democratic Party at the national level has dropped the plight of immigrants trapped inside the government’s illegal dragnet. Despite the Trump administration’s flouting a legal deadline which required that it reunite all immigrant children separated from their families under the “zero tolerance” policy, no Democrats have called for the prosecution of Trump or any members of his cabinet.

Rather, the opposition of Democratic Party officials and liberal commentators has focused on claims that Trump has been colluding with Russia, while denouncing all forms of social opposition to the administration as the product of foreign agents seeking to “sow divisions” in American society.

A recent report in the *Fredricksburg Free Lance-Star* noted that the state of Virginia plans to admit more immigrant detainees into its detention centers. Referencing comments by ICE’s Richmond sub-office chief, the publication states “detainees will begin arriving at the Caroline Detention Center ‘soon’.” Virginia detention centers have housed at least 19,000 immigrant detainees since 2008.



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