

Lawsuit exposes massive COVID-19 outbreak at privately-run immigrant detention center in Virginia

Joe Williams
1 August 2020

A federal lawsuit has exposed astronomical infection rates at a privately run immigrant detention facility in Farmville, Virginia. The Farmville Detention Center, which has been run since 2010 by the for-profit Immigration Centers of America (ICA) on behalf of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), has reported that 290 out of 312 inmates have tested positive, along with eight staff members. The facility has three times the infection rate of the second-most overrun immigrant detention facility, according to the *Washington Post*.

Inmates at the prison relate a horrific but typical pattern of abuse, neglect and torture, made all the more inhumane by the unchecked spread of COVID-19. According to Christian Alberto Santos Garcia, one of the plaintiffs, “I believe that if the facility keeps being run in this way—no air conditioning, dust everywhere, dirty air, terrible food that we cannot eat, not being allowed doctor visits, not being given any medicine—I will not get better.” Temperatures in Virginia have broken 100 degrees Fahrenheit every day for the past two weeks.

The lawsuit further argues that the prison has violated its own policies by allowing transferring inmates from prisons with known outbreaks to mingle with other inmates and spread the disease.

Court documents explain that in June, 74 inmates transferred from prisons in Arizona and Florida, both of which were known to have high infection rates, and two-thirds of these detainees would indeed be positive when they were eventually tested. Rather than being taken to a jail in Caroline County for 14 days of quarantine they were simply put into the general population in Farmville. Plaintiff Garcia told the court in documents

given to the media that “The bunk beds are so close to each other that it feels like we are practically sleeping in the same bed.”

In response, Democratic Governor Ralph Northam and the state’s two Democratic senators, Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, appealed to the Trump administration to get the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to intervene. The senators write jointly: “The Farmville ICE facility and surrounding community now face a dire situation where almost every detainee at the Farmville facility has tested positive for COVID-19. This presents a clear risk to individuals within the facility but also endangers the broader community as facility staff and released detainees have interaction with the general public.”

The feckless character of the entire Democratic Party in the face of Trump’s vicious anti-immigrant policy is on display in the pleading letter sent by the two Democrats. This is further exposed in comments by Simon Sandoval-Moshenberg, legal director of the Immigrant Advocacy Program for the Legal Aid Justice Center, to the *Post*. Sandoval-Moshenberg, who represents some of the plaintiffs, pointed out that the state has authority to act on its own, because the facility is not on federal property. “It exists as a local jail in the Commonwealth of Virginia,” Sandoval-Moshenberg said. “Northam is treating it as if it were the Pentagon.”

ICE responded by downplaying the severity of the outbreak, absurdly claiming that only one inmate—just 0.3 percent of those infected—was hospitalized, and that all but three were asymptomatic. All detainees, it said, had received “appropriate medical care,” although the agency did not detail of what that consisted.

According to the Virginia Health Department, the

number of coronavirus cases in surrounding Prince Edward County has doubled to 289 in just the past month. Officials in the town of Farmville, which receives a portion of the profits Immigration Centers of America generates by operating the facility, have evaded calls for comment. Farmville is also the location of two universities, Longwood University and Hampden-Sydney College.

The inhumane character of the treatment being dealt to detainees is demonstrated by the prison's policy of quarantining transferred inmates in the nearby county jail for two weeks. Amid the catastrophic COVID-19 outbreak, prisons in the US have proven to be an especially deadly vector for the coronavirus, reporting nearly 82,000 cases and at least 735 deaths. Rather than "protecting" local populations from dangerous immigrants, as the Trump administration claims, privately-run facilities like Farmville in fact are working to spread COVID-19.

Prison Director Jeffrey Crawford claimed in his deposition that ICE lied about the infection rates at the transferring prisons. "When I was alerted to the detainees' impending transfer, I inquired about their level of potential exposure to COVID-19 at their previous facilities. In response, ICE stated that there were no active COVID-19 cases at the Arizona facility and that there were very few cases at the Florida facility." If true, this leaves wide open the possibility of willful ignorance on Crawford's part.

The prison has also obstructed joint efforts by the state Health Department and the National Guard to conduct testing. It canceled an event scheduled for July 21 and rejected offers to reschedule.

The inaction on Northam's part is consistent with his administration's prior collaboration with Trump's anti-immigrant scapegoating. The *World Socialist Web Site* reported in August 2018, shortly after Northam was elected as part of a "blue wave" of Democratic victories that were in large part the result of popular revulsion at Trump's agenda, about his administration's whitewashing of the gross physical and mental abuse of immigrant minors at the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center.

In that case, the prison was sued for allegations that staff kicked and punched children, put them in solitary confinement for weeks at a time for minor infractions, or none at all, tied minors to restraining chairs for days

on end, stripped children naked and put them in harnesses, mimicked the sensation of suffocation by gagging children with spit masks, forced drugging and inadequate and toxic food.

Northam appointed a panel at the Department of Juvenile Justice to "investigate" the allegations, which promptly concluded that the prison was "in compliance with applicable regulations and certification standards" and thus "no evidence of abuse or neglect" was found.

Northam's prostration before the Trump administration's fascistic immigration agencies, even as the president has voided fundamental democratic rights and deployed shock battalions drawn from ICE to put down peaceful protests, demonstrates that there is no constituency in either the Democratic or Republican Party that is interested in defending the US Constitution.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact