

Federal judge orders second investigation into Virginia immigrant detention center hit by mass outbreak of COVID-19

Joe Williams
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A federal judge has ordered a second investigation into the Farmville Detention Center after a 10-member Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) team of scientists issued a report on Friday detailing numerous ongoing staff and administrative practices that are facilitating the spread of COVID-19 inside the privately-run prison and nearby communities.

The prison has the worst coronavirus outbreak of any immigrant detention facility in the country, with 290 out of 312 inmates testing positive, along with 27 staff members. On August 5, a Canadian inmate, James Thomas Hill, died from the virus after having been transported to a nearby hospital with breathing problems several weeks prior.

According to the CDC report, employees are not using essential personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks. Guards have been showing up to work after displaying symptoms of the virus, and there was a complete inability for inmates and employees to practice social distancing when not isolated in their cells. Cafeterias, hallways, waiting rooms, sleeping areas, and break rooms are all tight, confined spaces. Inmate seats and bunks are bolted into the floor making social distancing impossible.

According to the lawsuit filed by current inmates, the outbreak at Farmville began when several dozen detainees were shipped to the facility in June and July from prisons in Arizona and Florida, two centers of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Judge Leonie Brinkema ordered the investigation after previously preventing further transfers into the prison.

The order, and the lawsuit that sparked it, come after months of stonewalling by Immigration Centers of America (ICA), which is a federal contractor for

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The prison has blocked any attempt at independent oversight, and even rejected offers of cost-free assistance from the Virginia Department of Health for controlling the spread of coronavirus.

Governor Ralph Northam, a Democrat, for his part, denied any ability to intervene directly, making legally dubious claims that the state does not have authority over its own territory when it contains a business—in this case the prison owned by the for-profit ICA—operated under a federal contract.

Despite the agency's egregious findings, which have not been made public, the CDC did not recommend any major changes to stem the flow of virus between inmates, guards, and the surrounding community. Dr. Homer Venters, a public health expert hired by the plaintiffs' attorneys, was allowed to listen to the team's oral debrief, and testified in court documents that the CDC found "most" of the prison to be in compliance with its guidelines.

This was seized upon by the ICA in its own court filing. Jeffrey Crawford, the director of Immigration Centers of America-Farmville, declared "ICA Farmville was largely in compliance with CDC recommendations, with only a few minor operational recommendations offered at that time, all of which I intend to implement at the facility." At a Farmville town council meeting the week before, Crawford said that "we understand the stories look terrible."

Crawford and ICA's lax attitude toward health and safety was denounced by members of the public at the town council meeting, with a city councilman declaring "We could have had massive deaths (in the community) because of it. And, you're sitting here talking about

everything you've done and 'Oh, don't worry about it.' It's a big deal."

Among ICA and ICE's more criminal policies is its practice of "quarantining" its detainees at local jails upon transfer, rather than at its own centers, increasing the likelihood of outbreaks throughout the community.

Judge Brinkema was far less satisfied with the CDC's conclusion, and ordered a second investigation to be conducted, without specifying how the new investigation's mandate will differ from the one just concluded. Her statement at the conclusion of Monday's hearing declared: "This is not rocket science. It's amazing to me that this would not have been done in a facility, which, because of the large inmate population, should have been on clear notice that you've got to have people distanced in order to prevent spread of the virus. The fact that not all employees are wearing masks, or PPE, correctly is very problematic."

In fact, the abuse of immigrants at the detention center, and the unwillingness of the Democratic Party-controlled state of Virginia to meaningfully oppose the extraordinarily reckless practices of ICA, shows in a concentrated form the general attitude of indifference that the ruling class in America has adopted to the threat which the COVID-19 pandemic poses to the population, both native-born and immigrant.

Republican President Donald Trump, speaking at an Arizona campaign rally on Tuesday, reprised fascistic themes that his Democratic opponents would seek to "abolish America's borders." In fact, as is clear from the treatment of detainees in Farmville, Trump and his border agents at ICE and the Department of Homeland Security as a whole are not the least bit concerned with protecting the population from the spread of COVID-19. In fact, it is US detention facilities, often run by profit seeking corporations like ICA, that have become the primary vectors of the disease, to immigrants and citizens alike.



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