

Migrant children speak of horrifying conditions in detention centers set up by the Biden administration

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Testimonials filed in a California federal court this week reveal the horrific conditions faced by migrant children who are being held in federal detention centers, euphemistically categorized as “emergency shelters,” set up by the Biden administration. The conditions described in the 17 testimonials from children aged nine to 17, largely from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, include being given spoiled food, lack of drinking water and clean clothes, overcrowding, inability to contact family members and severe mental health issues.

The testimonials were gathered by attorneys with the Center for Human Rights & Constitutional Law and the National Center for Youth Law, who are representing the children in the long-running Flores settlement, a court agreement setting bedrock standards of care for children in federal custody. Recorded between March and early June, these testimonials make it obvious that the Biden administration’s promises of a more humane approach to immigration remain mere rhetoric.

The situation described by the children in their accounts presents a grim picture of what it means to be a detained, unaccompanied minor under the Democratic Party’s watch.

A 13-year-old from Honduras, who was separated from her father while crossing into the US, has been held in Fort Bliss, Texas, for over two months. She told attorneys that she had problems sleeping in her overcrowded tent because the bright lights were on all night. But it was the food that was an even bigger issue. Much of it was inedible, the hamburger they had been served the night before had a distinct odor that made it impossible for them to eat, and one of her friends had been served some chicken that still had feathers on it.

“I really only eat popsicles and juice because that is the only food I can trust,” she said.

A 14-year-old from Guatemala, who is being held in a facility in Houston, spoke of the extreme heat in the tents that caused children to faint, the lack of clean drinking water and being forced to drink rancid milk when they ran out of water. A 17-year-old Guatemalan girl detained at Fort Bliss described sleeping in a large white tent with about three hundred girls, on cots stacked on top of each other. She said it was hard to sleep due to the rattling noise the tent’s metal beams made at night.

Many of the testimonies highlighted the impact of the situation on the mental health of the detainees. A teenager, who had been held in the Dallas, Texas, convention center, spoke of feeling “asphyxiated” in the overcrowded facility which held 2,600 children. The testimonial continues in a heartbreakin vein: “There is no one here I can talk to about my case. There’s also no one here I can talk to when I’m feeling sad. There’s no one here; I just talk to God. It helps me and I cry. It would help if I could have a Bible.” A 16-year-old Guatemalan boy, who has been held in a facility in Pecos, Texas, for over two months when his testimonial was collected, spoke of a sense of despair, “a lot of sadness” among the detainees: “Every day, I don’t have the desire to eat... I just want to lie down all the time.” In Fort Bliss, the teenagers spoke of being placed on suicide watch, and the fact that many of the detainees were so depressed that they used the plastic ID tags to cut themselves.

A CBS News report released Tuesday further reinforces the general horror of the situation in these emergency shelters. Focusing particularly on Fort Bliss,

the report describes protests by detainees to demand improved living conditions, an aborted attempt by some to escape what even federal employees described as a “juvenile detention center,” and a level of distress so high as to require “bans on pencils, pens, scissors, nail clippers, and regular toothbrushes.” At one point, workers reported having been asked to “remove the metal nose clips from N95 face masks.”

The federal employees, who spoke to CBS on the condition of anonymity, described an abysmal pit of despair where panic attacks were par for the course, and children were held without any information about their fates or contact with family members. An employee who had volunteered at Fort Bliss stated that she saw girls having panic attacks that involved seizure-like symptoms: “Their bodies start to twist... They can’t take it anymore.” Congresswoman Veronica Escobar, a Democrat who represents the Texas district where Fort Bliss is located, told CBS News that the problem with the shelter has been chronic, and has not improved despite her raising these issues after each of her four visits to the center.

In response, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provided a pro-forma and blatantly false PR statement deeming the detention camp a paradise for children: “From exercise classes to weekly meetings with case managers for every child at Fort Bliss, we’ve worked hard to provide access to recreation, counseling and behavioral health services and more... There is a library on site which kids are encouraged to visit anytime, weekly spiritual services and comment boxes in every residential space for kids to confidentially reach out with concerns.”

Emergency shelters like the one at Fort Bliss were set up by the Biden administration to supposedly alleviate the horrendous overcrowding in Border Patrol Facilities that was exposed in late-March. These shelters do not have state licenses that certify their ability to care for minors and their standards of care as well as ability to provide services such as case management is much lower than what is expected of normal HHS shelters. Over the past few months, the administration has prevented reporters from accessing any of these sites. The testimonials of the detainees and that of the concerned federal employees make the reasons for this secrecy obvious.



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