

Contract for immigrant detention center to end

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Williamson County officials plan to end their contract for a controversial detention center in Central Texas by next October, ending a saga that has drawn national attention to how the federal government handles illegal immigrant families.

The commissioners voted unanimously on Tuesday to ask Williamson County attorneys to notify Corrections Corporation of America and U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement officials of plans to terminate the contract by Oct. 2, 2008. Earlier this summer, the American Civil Liberties Union and Homeland Security officials settled a federal lawsuit over allegations of substandard conditions at the T. Don Hutto family detention center, a former medium-security prison in Taylor used to house immigrant families facing deportation.

"Our action today was not about immigration because we support the federal government's stance," said Commissioner Cynthia Long. "The action was regarding the county's liability for a facility that we don't operate."

The commissioners also want CCA and ICE to renegotiate the terms of the final year of the contract, to give the county greater protection from potential litigation and improve staffing levels to make sure all standards are met, Long said.

The announcement is the latest chapter in a controversy that has sparked protests across Texas about the treatment of families in immigration detention. ICE spokeswoman Nina Pruneda said she had no immediate comment Tuesday night. Texas ACLU officials could not be reached for comment.

ICE officials started placing families in Hutto, one of only two such centers in the nation, in 2006. U.S. government officials said housing families in the Taylor center was a more humane solution than separating parents from their children.

But immigrant advocates argued that the conditions were substandard, and filed 10 lawsuits on behalf of immigrant children housed with their parents at Hutto. The complaints included allegations that the children were subject to psychologically abusive guards and substandard medical care and nutrition.

In August, a federal judge in Austin approved a settlement that required ICE and CCA to make improvements, including limiting the amount of time families spend at Hutto and to try and avoid placing most asylum seekers there. Other concessions include installing curtains around toilets and allowing children to go on field trips with their parents' permission.

Williamson County agreed to administer the Hutto contract in 2006. On Jan. 31, the county signed an amended agreement that was set to expire Jan 31, 2009. As the administrator of the contract, Williamson County receives \$1 per day per detainee held at the facility, about \$15,872 per month, said Connie Watson, a spokeswoman for Williamson County.