

New ICE family detention centers a step in wrong direction

Dallas Morning News

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June 18, 2008

The federal government's Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency is accepting bids today for contracts to construct three new privately run detention centers across the country for children and their families awaiting immigration proceedings.

These facilities, each to be built with up to 200 beds, will expand the system of family detention made controversial in recent years at the T. Don Hutto detention center in Taylor, Texas.

The proposal for new centers is a step in the wrong direction. Congress has repeatedly called on ICE, the agency within the Department of Homeland Security responsible for immigration matters, to implement alternatives to detention programs for families, stating that detention of families should be the last alternative and not the first.

In 2006, when I first went to Hutto, I was appalled by the living conditions. Children as young as infants, along with their families, were detained in a converted medium-security prison run by the Corrections Corporation of America, a for-profit prison management corporation. Children received one hour of education a day and wore prison uniforms. They were required to be in their cells for long periods during the day to be present for multiple cell counts.

Many of the detainees at Hutto have come to the United States fleeing persecution or social turmoil — asylum seekers fleeing civil conflict in Eastern Africa, Iraqi Christians targeted by fundamentalists and Central Americans seeking refuge from drug, gang and domestic violence. No detainee has been accused of a crime.

The psychological toll on children in detention is significant. Often already traumatized by conditions in their home countries and the process of being uprooted during migration, children and parents at Hutto reported being threatened with separation from one another as a disciplinary measure.

After widespread public advocacy against the facility, national media attention, a lawsuit and a settlement, conditions at the facility are significantly better. Children no longer wear prison scrubs, and they now receive seven hours of education a day. Also, they remain at the detention center for a significantly shorter amount of time.

Fundamentally, however, family detention remains an inappropriate response to asylum seekers and immigrant parents and children. Advocates continue to be concerned about

news reports from Hutto, such as an alleged sexual assault of a detainee by a guard and the separation of a child from her mother for four days. Both incidents occurred last year.

Alternatives to detention include community-based, homelike shelters that provide access to counseling and legal services. Intensive-supervision programs also keep families together and out of detention. In fact, alternatives to detention programs have proved effective at ensuring that immigrants appear for their court hearings through a combination of telephone reporting and home visits. These programs are also substantially more cost-effective than detention.

One study by the Vera Institute found that more than 90 percent of immigrants on a supervised release program attended their immigration hearings. The average cost of a supervision program was \$12 a day, compared with \$61 a day to detain an immigrant. The cost savings are likely more pronounced in the context of family detention, which is more expensive than detaining adult immigrants.

Instead of contracting the construction of more family detention centers, ICE should seriously invest in alternatives to detention programs.

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