

# Detention for Immigrants That Looks Less Like Prison

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On a patch of Texas farmland near the Gulf of Mexico, [immigration](#) officials on Tuesday unveiled one of the most visible results of a three-year-old plan to overhaul the nation's immigration detention system: a brand-new center intended to provide a less penal setting for detainees.

Just don't call it prison, they insist. The center is the nation's first to be designed and built with the new reforms in mind and represents a shift from the federal government's longtime reliance on jails and jail-like buildings that immigrant advocates have long argued are inappropriate and unduly harsh for people being held on civil violations. Detainees will be free to move through much of the center 24 hours a day. Unarmed staff members, dressed in blue polo shirts and khaki trousers, are known as "resident advisers," not guards.

"To bring the fundamental changes to a system that was that big and that diverse, we knew it was going to be difficult and time-consuming, but after three years, we have a lot to show for it," Gary Mead, a top federal immigration official, said in a telephone interview before the opening. "This is the most tangible evidence of that."

The 608-bed center, in Karnes County, Tex., will house male detainees who present minimal safety concerns or flight risk, officials said. The first detainees are expected to arrive in about three weeks.

Spread across 29 acres, the center is designed according to the Obama administration's new mandates calling for greater unescorted movement and recreational opportunities in a less penal setting.

The gentler approach is immediately evident in the center's modernist facade, which is painted in bright primary colors — a far cry from the dreary bunkerlike structures that have characterized the system.

Inside, behind high tan-colored walls, the center has the feel of a school, with dormitories of bunk beds, a gymnasium, a library, computers with Internet access, cable television, a medical center, landscaped courtyards, an outdoor soccer pitch and courts for basketball and volleyball.

There are also courtrooms for immigration hearings, which will be conducted before judges in San Antonio and Houston via video conferencing.

Plans for the center emerged from a comprehensive reform strategy that the Obama administration announced in August 2009.

The system had for years come under fierce criticism by human rights and immigrants' advocates who exposed detainee mistreatment, including poor — and sometimes fatal — medical care. Critics also accused immigration officials of impinging on detainees' civil rights by frequently transferring them from jail to jail, often far away from their families and lawyers.

The stresses on the system quickly mounted under the Obama administration, which increased immigrant detentions. More than 396,900 people were deported last year, a record high for the third year. Of those, about 217,000 had criminal convictions, also a record, officials said.

Among other goals, the Obama administration's reforms seek to establish more centralized authority over the system; improve the system's efficiency by enlarging capacity near big cities where the nation's immigrant populations are concentrated; and upgrade living conditions by renovating existing centers designed for penal detention, or build new ones.

The new Texas site, the Karnes County Civil Detention Center, is one of at least three detention centers the Obama administration plans to build. Others are planned for South Florida and the Chicago area, though they will also house medium- and high-security detainees, said Mr. Mead, executive associate director for enforcement and removal operations for [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), an arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

The agency is also planning to upgrade a detention center in Essex County, N.J.

Meanwhile, immigration officials have consolidated the detention network, closing about 90 substandard centers. About 400,000 detainees pass through the system's remaining 250 centers every year. About 10 percent of the centers — holding nearly half of all detainees — are run by private companies under contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Among other reforms, officials said, the agency has hired 42 on-site monitors for the largest detention centers to ensure that the detainees are being treated in compliance with the agency's standards.

The agency has also expanded its medical staff and streamlined the approval process for detainee medical care, officials said. And it has sharply reduced the number of detainee transfers, Mr. Mead said.

Last month, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which oversees the nation's detention system, issued a revised set of "detention standards" governing the care and treatment of detainees.

Human Rights First, a monitoring group, called the standards "an important step forward" for the agency, but said the guidelines fell short of prescribing "conditions appropriate for the majority of detained asylum seekers or other immigration detainees," including what the group considered sufficient outdoor access, freedom of movement and privacy.

But the new guidelines were also criticized by some as being too lenient. Representative Lamar Smith, a Texas Republican who is chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, called the standards “a hospitality guideline for illegal immigrants.”

“The administration goes beyond common sense to accommodate illegal immigrants and treats them better than citizens in federal custody,” he said in a statement.

When asked for a response to Mr. Smith’s comments, Mr. Mead demurred.

“What these standards do is create a framework to house detainees based on their individual threat to the community and risk of flight,” he offered. “They’re not one-size-fits-all.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/14/us/model-immigration-detention-center-unveiled-in-texas.html>