

Immigrant Detention Facilities Inhumane, Study Claims

by Nick Swartzell

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Two Texas detention centers are among the 10 worst in the country for human rights violations, according to a series of reports released Thursday by Detention Watch Network, a national group advocating reform of the U.S. immigration and deportation system.

"Our immigration detention system is in crisis," Andrea Black, executive director of the network, said at a press conference organized by advocacy group Grassroots Leadership in Austin. Black said the reports detail inadequate medical care and nutrition and inmates being confined in crowded cells for up to 23 hours a day.

The network's reports claim that immigrants' human rights are being violated at that the Houston Processing Center and the Polk County Detention Center. The two facilities in total house about 1,700 immigrants and are privately run under contracts with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Carl Rusnok, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said officials from ICE are looking into the network's findings and have offered to meet with the writers of the report.

"ICE is in the process of fully reviewing the reports," Rusnok said in an email. "However, it is disappointing that the reports appear to be built primarily on anonymous allegations that cannot be investigated or substantiated."

Rusnok said the agency has made major changes in its detention practices in recent years.

"ICE stands behind the significant work we've done reforming the detention system by increasing federal oversight, improving conditions of confinement and prioritizing the health and safety of the individuals in our custody."

According to the network, both Texas facilities often force inmates to wait as long as a week before seeing a doctor. The report on the Polk facility alleges that medical personnel don't speak Spanish, and that a doctor is available only once a week. Inadequate care, the report says, has led to misdiagnoses, botched prescriptions and general medical neglect.

Both facilities also punish inmates inappropriately with solitary confinement, according to the report, confining inmates for 30 days or more for minor offenses. At the Houston Processing Center, an immigrant from Africa claimed he had been held in solitary confinement for three and a half months.

Christopher Greeder, spokesman for Community Education Centers, which runs the Polk facility, called the findings "baseless."

"The IAH Secure Adult Detention Facility takes great pride in providing a safe, secure and humane environment for detainees," he said in an email. "IAH undergoes regular reviews by our own internal quality management practices as well as by various credible outside organizations to include Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the American Correctional Association (ACA), whose standards measure the safety, security and quality of operations at the facility. In fact, recent facility reviews by both ACA and ICE did not reveal any significant problems as alleged by this report."

The network's findings came from visits to each facility conducted in July 2012 by Grassroots Leadership. Visitors to the sites observed conditions and conducted interviews with inmates.

Rusnok said ICE has implemented processes for inmates or advocacy organizations to report mistreatment, and has an office dedicated specifically to addressing such issues.

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