

Dear Secretary Janet Napolitano,

As a coalition of state and national groups from criminal justice, immigration reform, and faith-based organizations, we call on your office to close the IAH Polk County Secure Adult Detention Facility. In November 2012, the facility was highlighted amongst the ten worst detention centers in the country by the Detention Watch Network, a national organization committed to comprehensive reform of the immigration system. This 1,054-bed detention center is run by the for-profit private prison corporation Community Education Centers, a company with a long track record of lawsuits, scandals, and corruption.

We believe that the Department of Homeland Security should terminate its contract with CEC for the IAH Polk County Secure Adult Detention Facility immediately and pursue humane alternatives to detention.

In July 2012, four representatives of local advocacy groups were granted a rare tour of the facility. The tour revealed conditions that are inappropriate for people in civil detention. For instance, men at the facility spoke of receiving inadequate medical care: responses to medical requests take days or even weeks; most medical personnel do not speak Spanish and are unable to communicate with the men; and ailments are often incorrectly or insufficiently treated. One man, who had undergone surgery for osteoporosis before entering the facility, said that his condition had worsened because he had been denied milk or calcium supplements. In fact, almost all of the men interviewed said that the food was inadequate and not nutritious.

During the visit, men imprisoned in the facility lived in cramped eight person cells measuring approximately 504 square feet. The cells offer no natural light, room for movement, or privacy while showering or using the bathroom. Men are kept in their cells for 21 to 23 hours a day without meaningful programming; at the time of the report, CEC had failed to construct the outdoor space mandated by its contract and the only recreation areas were small indoor spaces. The small on-site library had little Spanish-language material and was severely lacking in legal resources.

The detention center is more than an hour from Houston, the nearest major metropolitan area. Because of its remote location, the facility is cut off from lawyers, social workers, and human rights observers. Family and friends of detained men are often unable to make the long journey to the facility; when they are able to visit, they are kept behind glass partitions and can only communicate through unclean metal mouthpieces. One interviewee, a Colombian man who was raised in the US, had never seen his newborn son because his wife was unable to travel long distances with an infant. For many families, even the cost of phone calls is prohibitively expensive. This extreme isolation – the inability to touch or even talk with loved ones or legal representatives – further contributes to the prison-like atmosphere and causes psychological and emotional duress for those detained.

ICE should prioritize release of immigrants into alternatives to detention and community support programs that are far more humane, less costly, and are effective at ensuring immigrants are able to appear at their hearings. As a first step toward ending inhumane detention, we call for the closure of the IAH Polk County Secure Adult Detention Center.

We appreciate your attention in this matter and would be pleased to provide further information.

Signed:

Alianza Mexicana
Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition
Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera
Border Network for Human Rights
Catholic Charities of Central Texas
Dream PAC
Detention Watch Network
Enlace
Fe y Justicia Worker Center
Grassroots Leadership
Houston United
Houston Peace and Justice Center
Human Rights Defense Center
Immigration Task Force of Mission Presbytery
In the Public Interest
International Action Center
Justice Policy Institute
Justice Strategies
Law Office of Karen J. Crawford
LIFT-Houston
Living Hope Wheelchair Association
National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC)
North Texas Dream Team
PODER
Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association (PHEWA)
Private Corrections Institute
Refugee and Immigrant Education and Legal Services (RAICES)
San Antonio Immigrant Youth Movement
Texans United for Families
Texas Civil Rights Project
Texas Dream Alliance
Texas Jail Project
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
University Leadership Initiative
Waco DREAM Alliance
Wilco Justice Alliance
Worker's Defense Project