

President Obama, don't put refugee families behind bars

Dear President Obama:

We believe that all people and their families deserve to have their basic human rights and dignity respected, regardless of where they were born or their citizenship status. It is one of our most sacred ideals to welcome the stranger.

Our consciences have been shocked as thousands of Central American refugees have turned up at our southern border seeking asylum. The refugees include both families with children and children traveling alone. What they have in common is that they have embarked on a journey of unimaginable danger to make it to our border, hoping to find sanctuary. Data from the Department of Homeland Security can tell us why they are so desperate. DHS reports that the majority of unaccompanied children coming to the U.S. are from some of the most violent and impoverished parts of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.¹

These facts have touched our hearts and moved us to demand that these refugees, whether they are children traveling alone or with their families, be treated with dignity and respect. First and foremost, that means not locking them up inside immigrant detention centers, especially if they are operated by for-profit, private prison companies.

We are disappointed that your Administration has ordered the quick resurgence of immigrant family detention in response to this crisis. This is not living up to our ideals and puts us on the wrong side of history.

The detention of adult immigrants has unfortunately been normalized since the 1990s, when the U.S. made a monumental shift in immigration policy to use detention as a primary means of enforcement.² The detention of families with children is particularly odious, however. The last time a family detention center was closed, it was after reports of shocking human rights violations against children and families emerged from inside the Hutto facility in Taylor, Texas.

President Obama, you know that it doesn't have to be this way. In 2009, after years of intense pressure and lawsuits alleging human rights abuses, your administration did the right thing and ended

¹ "Map: These Are the Places Central American Child Migrants Are Fleeing" Mother Jones, June 27, 2014. <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2014/06/map-unaccompanied-child-migrants-central-america-honduras>

² "The history of immigrant detention in the U.S." Detention Watch Network, accessed July 30, 2014. <http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/node/2381>

immigrant family detention at the T. Don Hutto Detention Center in Taylor, Texas, and canceled plans for new centers.

However, the opening of new immigrant family detention centers in Artesia, New Mexico and Karnes City, Texas is a new threat to these refugees' human rights. The people detained in these two remote facilities have little to no legal access or social services and education for the children is lacking. The conditions of abuse and neglect inside these centers will only further traumatize the people detained there.

Immigrant family detention is harmful to families and children and is unnecessary when there are alternatives. Alternatives to detention have been shown to be effective in ensuring appearance in immigration proceedings. They are also significantly less expensive than detention, and far more appropriate for families with children. We call for an immediate release of refugee families and children from immigrant detention and for no additional detention facilities to be opened. Detention is a human rights violation and no person - especially families with children - deserves to be put in a cage for seeking a better life in the United States.

Sincerely,
Texans United for Families
The Hutto Visitation Program
Grassroots Leadership