



3/30/20

To: Dr. Lori Palazzo, Medical Director, Local Health Authority, Williamson County

cc: Williamson County Board of Health, Williamson County Commissioners Court
Taylor City Council, Texas Hospital Association COVID-19 Taskforce, Grassroots
Leadership

From: Allen S. Keller, M.D., Associate Professor of Medicine, NYU School of Medicine
Attending Physician, Department of Medicine, Bellevue Hospital
Founder, Bellevue Program for Survivors of Torture

Dear Dr. Palazzo,

I write to respectfully and urgently, ask you and other health officials in Williamson County to ensure that immigrant detainees held at the T. Don Hutto Residential Center in Taylor Texas are immediately paroled. As Williamson County and the rest of our nation confront the COVID-19 Pandemic this is vital for the health and safety of the immigrant detainees there-all of whom are non-criminal asylum seekers- as well as for the health and safety of Williamson County residents. It is my unequivocal, professional opinion that it is a medical, moral and public health necessity to do so as quickly as possible.

I base my opinion on more than 25 years of knowledge and experience evaluating prison conditions including immigration detention facilities. I have visited 30 immigration detention centers throughout the U.S. I am an Associate Professor of Medicine at NYU Grossman School of Medicine and an Attending Physician in Medicine at Bellevue Hospital in New York City, which currently in the “eye of the Coronavirus storm.” I hope that the enormous, unprecedented challenges and difficulties we are currently facing serve as a cautionary tale of what lies ahead for Central Texas in the not-so distant future.

I’m sure you are aware that the spread of COVID-19 in Williamson County is accelerating. As of March 30, 2020, there are 273 people infected with COVID-19, two of whom have died. In Williamson County, the first identified COVID-19 infections were identified on March 18, 2020. Less than 2 weeks later, there are 42 confirmed COVID-19 infections and 1 death.

Hutto’s crowded conditions and limited healthcare capacity make it unsafe for detained immigrants. Social distancing, essential for minimizing COVID-19 spread is virtually impossible at Hutto. The dormitories where detainees stay are communal settings with many detainees living in the confined space of each dormitory. Meals and recreation time occur in communal settings. I am deeply concerned that COVID-19 will spread like wildfire both within and outside the facility. Continuing to accept new detainees, including those transferred from other immigration

detention facilities makes the spread of COVID-19 at Hutto even more likely. COVID-19 poses an imminent danger to all Hutto immigrant detainees.

The limited clinical services at Hutto are inadequate to address the predictable medical needs inherent in the COVID-19 Pandemic. Cases of poor medical care at Hutto are well documented. Many of the detainees held at Hutto are at particularly high risk for developing severe COVID-19 infections and dying. This includes elderly detainees at Hutto as well as detainees with underlying medical conditions including HIV infection, hypertension, diabetes, coronary artery disease and chronic pulmonary conditions.

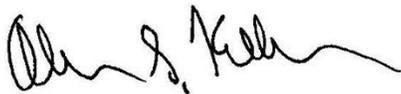
The COVID-19 Pandemic will worsen the already fragile mental health of detained immigrants at Hutto. Substantial research, including by myself, demonstrates that detained asylum seekers frequently suffer from depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of trauma and persecution they suffered in their home countries. Their psychological distress worsens the longer they remain in detention. It is my understanding that well-founded fear and psychological distress from continued detention during the COVID-19 Pandemic is already pervasive among Hutto detainees and will only worsen.

It is almost certain that immigration detention staff, as well as contractors and vendors, will unknowingly spread COVID-19 infection they acquired in the community. Already, at several detention facilities around the country, staff and detainees have tested positive. The risk of unknowingly spreading COVID-19 is made even greater given the substantial time period during which those infected with COVID-19 do not yet show symptoms but are shedding the virus and are highly contagious. Inadequate testing capacity, as well as the risk of missing infections even when testing becomes available, makes a dangerous situation even worse. Both detained immigrants and members of the local community are unnecessarily put at risk. Furthermore, as Coronavirus infections spread in Williamson County local healthcare resources will be easily overwhelmed.

All Hutto detainees are asylum seekers held under civil non-criminal detention. They pose no safety risk and most have alternatives to detention, there is no good reason to continue to imprison immigrant detainees. Throughout the U.S. there is a trend, whenever safe and feasible, to parole criminal inmates as a means of preventing spread of Coronavirus. Continuing to detain asylum seekers, who are not criminals, not only defies logic but is cruel. Deporting detainees to their home countries is not an option as many countries have closed their borders.

I urge you to immediately parole immigrant detainees at Hutto. Failure to do so unnecessarily endangers the health and well-being of immigrant detainees, facility staff and the community. Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allen S. Keller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Allen S. Keller, M.D.
Associate Professor of Medicine, NYU Grossman School of Medicine
Attending Physician in Medicine, Bellevue Hospital
Founder, Bellevue Program for Survivors of Torture