

Fears grow that coronavirus is taking hold among immigrants in US custody as three children test positive

By Meenakshi Jagadeesan
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On Thursday, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) announced that three unaccompanied migrant children, who had been placed under its care, had tested positive for COVID-19. The ORR, a part of the US Department of Health and Human Services, is responsible for housing migrant minors and is currently responsible for nearly 3,400 unaccompanied minors detained by the US government.

According to the agency, 18 children were tested for the virus, with three confirmed cases, 11 negative and four still pending. Five staff members and one staff contractor at three separate facilities in New York recently tested positive for COVID-19. One staff member at a facility in Texas, and one foster parent in Washington State have also tested positive.

These numbers, it must be kept in mind, are just the tip of the iceberg. Earlier this week, ICE confirmed the second case of COVID-19 amongst detainees in one of its centers in New Jersey. However, given the cramped conditions, bare essential—if that—medical care, and reports of generally dubious standards of hygiene in detention centers around the country, it is hard to believe that the numbers are a reflection of anything other than the very limited testing being carried out.

Americans for Immigrant Justice (AI Justice), a non-profit law firm published a letter two days ago from immigrants detained in the Broward Transitional Center (BTC) in south Florida. The letter written on behalf of hundreds of detainees held in the center is a shocking exposé of the extremely dangerous conditions prevailing in such places and a desperate plea from immigrants who face the very real danger of falling victim to the escalating coronavirus pandemic.

BTC is a non-criminal facility run by the Geo Group,

one of the biggest private contractors benefitting from the vast network of detention centers put in place by the Obama and Trump administrations. Its inmates, currently over 700, include a large number of immigrants with family members who are American citizens.

In the past few weeks, the detention center has claimed that it has taken necessary precautions to protect detainees from the spread of the coronavirus. These measures have included ending family visitations, reducing library access and preventing release of private property. However, given the situation described by the detainees, these appear to be more punitive than part of a rational and measured response to safeguard public health.

While ICE has claimed that it has limited the number of detentions in the past weeks, arresting only those who pose a public safety risk, the reality as described by the detainees seems to be quite different. Every day, new detainees are being brought into the center without any measures other than a cursory temperature check. Even though the new detainees could conceivably still be carriers of COVID-19, they are released into an already crowded facility in which six people share a small 10 by 12 foot room, and nearly 300 people are crowded in the cafeteria three times a day.

If that were not bad enough, the letter spells out the callousness of the facilities operators who have failed to provide the conditions for even basic hygiene during this public health crisis. On March 17, detainees experienced a water stoppage at the facility. While they were not given an advance notice, they were told that it would last two hours. It ended up being over 5 hours, with people having no access to hand washing stations,

showers or toilets.

The harrowing conditions are described in the letter: “At the regular lockdown at 18:30, we were instructed to go back to our rooms with feces in most of the toilets. When security was notified about the unsanitary conditions, we were told to proceed to the rooms and turn on the toilet vents in order to vacate the disturbing smell and spread of germs and bacteria.”

It was only after a peaceful protest by the detainees that the water supply was finally turned back on. As the letter writers point out, it shouldn't be a matter of struggle to have running water or sanitary conditions, particularly the midst of a pandemic. A large number of detainees, the letter states, are already exhibiting flu-like symptoms and the possibility of contagion is becoming more and more likely under prevailing conditions.

AI Justice quoted Rafael, a US citizen whose wife is being held in BTC: “My wife has asthma and is diabetic. If she gets the virus inside, she could die. ICE should let them out; she doesn't deserve to be there and with the virus she should be released soon. The children miss her very much and are affected by her detention.”

Even before the coronavirus outbreak, detention facilities for immigrants across the country had become notorious for their unsanitary conditions, poor medical facilities, and in some cases, outright physical and sexual abuse of detainees. These conditions have only been exacerbated in recent times.

As AI Justice executive director Cheryl Little noted: “Over the years, detainees held in ICE custody have been routinely subjected to poor, and often appalling, medical care. Detainees are entirely at the mercy of ICE to determine what medical care, if any, they get. Lives are literally at stake, and the urgency to obtain the release of those confined in immigration detention now cannot be overstated.” Even the former acting director of ICE John Sandweg, urged the agency to release all immigrants not subject to mandatory detention, since the detention centers, “are extremely susceptible to outbreaks of infectious diseases.”

Immigrants in federal custody have staged protests and hunger strikes demanding better safeguards against the spread of COVID-19.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, guards in facilities across the country have used pepper spray to

contain protesting detainees at least three times this past week alone. As of this posting over 350 immigrants held in the Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia have been on a hunger strike since Thursday. Nearly 2000 immigrants are being held in the detention center (formerly a jail), which is 50 miles from Dougherty County, which has the third highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the state.

Speaking to Siembra NC, an immigrant rights advocacy group, Ventura Quintanar-Rico, 32, of Mexico, one of the detained men, said: “We're just waiting to get infected. They're not taking the most basic coronavirus precautions at this place. If one of us gets infected, all of us will, we are not able to stay six feet apart from each other. We share space with 62 other people. We don't want to die here and it usually takes three to four days to get medical attention here.”

To continue the system of detention under such conditions, particularly given that many detainees have prevailing health issues that make them vulnerable to infection, as well citizen family members who have expressed their desire and willingness to provide shelter, is nothing short of criminal at this point.

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