

“I thought this was like an experimental concentration camp”

Nurse alleges forced sterilizations, medical malpractice at Georgia immigrant detention center

By Niles Niemuth
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A whistleblower complaint filed on behalf of a nurse who worked at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in southern Georgia until July alleges that a number of immigrant women detained there were subjected to sterilization through hysterectomies without their consent.

In the complaint, filed by the legal advocacy group Project South, the former nurse describes conditions at the center as akin to an “experimental concentration camp.”

The complaint also details the refusal of the center’s administrators to carry out COVID-19 testing or implement protective measures, putting detainees and employees throughout the country’s network of detention centers at risk of infection. It alleges that detainees who have spoken out about conditions at the facility have been placed in solitary confinement.

The chilling report provides further evidence of the sadistic abuse meted out by the Trump administration in its fascistic war on immigrants. At least 17 people have died so far this year in ICE custody from various causes, including COVID-19. Two guards at a facility in Louisiana died from coronavirus in April.

The target of the of the complaint, the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC), which is operated by the private prison company LaSalle Corrections, was previously the subject of complaints raised by the American Civil Liberties Union in 2012. The ACLU urged that the facility be closed due to widespread abuse as well as its remote location. A 2017 Project South investigation found that ICDC was guilty of human rights abuses, violations of due process rights

and unsanitary living conditions.

The nurse who lodged the latest complaint, Dawn Wooten, explained that detained women were sent to a doctor known as the “uterus collector” and that many did not have a full understanding of what was happening to them or why they were having the procedure. “When I met all these women who had had surgeries, I thought this was like an experimental concentration camp,” Wooten said. “It was like they’re experimenting with our bodies.”

While the extent of the sterilizations is unknown, a detained immigrant told Project South that she knew of five women who had hysterectomies while held at ICDC between October and December 2019.

“Everybody he sees has a hysterectomy—just about everybody,” Wooten said of the doctor who carried out the procedures at ICDC.

“He’s even taken out the wrong ovary on a young lady,” Wooten said. “She was supposed to get her left ovary removed because it had a cyst on the left ovary; he took out the right one. She was upset. She had to go back to take out the left and she wound up with a total hysterectomy. She still wanted children, so she has to go back home now and tell her husband that she can’t bear kids... she said she was not all the way out under anesthesia and heard him [the doctor] tell the nurse that he took the wrong ovary.”

Wooten also noted there is often an issue with obtaining consent, as medical staff rely on googling Spanish phrases or getting other detainees to interpret information about the medical procedure. “These immigrant women, I don’t think they really, totally, all

the way understand this is what's going to happen, depending on who explains it to them," Wooten said.

One detainee who spoke to Project South reviewed her harrowing experience with a sterilization procedure that was stopped at the hospital only when an antibody test for COVID-19 came back positive and she was sent back to the detention center.

A doctor initially told her that she had to go to the hospital to have an ovarian cyst removed in a non-invasive procedure. However, on the day of the procedure, the officer who was transporting her told her that, in fact, she was about to have her womb removed in a hysterectomy. The procedure was scuttled by her positive coronavirus test.

After she had been sent back to ICDC, a nurse told her that she would need to have the procedure done because of heavy bleeding. The nurse then told her it was to correct a thick womb.

The woman explained that she had never been diagnosed with either, and the doctors had spoken of a totally different procedure. The nurse reportedly became angry and began shouting after the woman explained that she did not want a hysterectomy. Reflecting on her experience, the detainee said that it "felt like they were trying to mess with my body."

The Project South report and Wooten's testimony reviewed various forms of medical malpractice at the facility, including the withholding of medication for cancer and HIV. Even if inmates were severely ill, the medical unit would only supply them with ibuprofen and send them back to their cells.

Wooten reports that ICDC repeatedly ignored Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines on handling COVID-19 positive patients so as to prevent the spread of the virus.

A video of ICDC inmates pleading for protection which was posted online in April forced the administration to provide them with a single cloth or paper mask, but nothing since. The *New York Times* reported that detainees resorted to fashioning makeshift masks out of scraps of cloth or broken meal containers in an effort to protect themselves.

ICE reported in August that 41 detainees at the facility had tested positive for the coronavirus, but Wooten said the actual number was certainly higher, since ICDC was not actively testing inmates, denied tests to those who requested them, and was not

reporting all its positive cases to ICE or the State Department. She also noted that detainees who were COVID-19 positive were still being transferred to other facilities or deported, and new arrivals were not being properly quarantined, ensuring that the virus would continue to spread. Employees who self-reported coronavirus symptoms were still made to work, and at least 13 officers at the facility have tested positive.

The horrors exposed by Wooten come amidst an escalating assault on the rights of immigrants in the lead-up to the Nov. 3 election, as Trump works to build up his far-right base. On Monday, a federal appeals court panel approved the Trump administration's termination of protected status for immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua and Sudan, removing legal status for nearly 400,000 people, many of whom have lived in the US for decades and have children who are citizens. The 2-1 ruling by the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit opens the immigrants up to deportation if they do not leave the country voluntarily.

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