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IMMIGRANT ADVOCATES DEMAND END DATE TO TERMINATE ICE CONTRACT AT NOTORIOUS GEORGIA DETENTION CENTER

SEPTEMBER 1, 2021, Ocilla, GA - Frontline communities and advocates are seeking government records regarding public officials’ progress and timeline for ending ICE operations at the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC), an immigration detention center in Georgia with a long track record of harrowing abuse. Three months after ICE [first announced](#) plans to end its contract with the facility, 100 people remain caged there in ICE custody, and others continue to be transferred to equally inhumane immigrant detention centers rather than released to their families.

The records requests will be filed Wednesday under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) by the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, Comunidad Estrella, Detention Watch Network, the Government Accountability Project, Innovation Law Lab, Migrant Equity Southeast, the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, SisterSong, Somos South Georgia, and Sur Legal Collaborative. The groups are calling on elected officials to make good on their public promises to shut down the facility and cut ties with private contractor LaSalle Corrections.

The FOIA request is part of a movement to shut down ICDC led by people formerly caged by ICE and supported by other activists and advocates. “The solution to closing down Irwin cannot be followed by transferring people to other facilities. People need to be reunited with their loved ones,” said Li An Sanchez, executive director of Comunidad Estrella. Through Comunidad Estrella, Sanchez, formerly detained at ICDC, provides support to trans and gender non-conforming people in ICE custody. “What is needed is releases not transfers.”

Last fall, a whistleblower represented by Government Accountability Project revealed accounts of forced hysterectomies and other medical abuses against men and women caged in ICDC. The allegations prompted a Congressional delegation to visit the facility and condemn the alleged medical misconduct funded with taxpayer money.

In the year following, grassroots organizations have called on the Biden Administration to keep its promise to end immigrant detention, including at ICDC. In April 2021, when activists in Georgia demanded the closure of ICE detention centers at a public event featuring President Biden, he responded: “I agree with you... gimme another five days.” In a May 2021 memo, DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas ordered ICE to sever contracts related to ICDC’s operation “as soon as possible,” but failed to give a public timeline.

Since then, ICDC Warden David Paulk has reportedly continued to tell staff that “the newspapers are lying” and ICDC is not closing. Now, more than 90 days after ICE’s announcement, advocacy groups and directly impacted individuals demand answers.

The abuses happening at ICDC are not isolated incidents, but rather part of a pattern of medical neglect and abuse at immigration detention centers across the country. Amidst the current COVID-19 global pandemic, conditions have only worsened.

Advocates have been documenting systemic human rights abuses at ICDC for years. In 2017, Project South and the Penn State Law Center for Immigrants’ Rights Clinic published a report called Imprisoned Justice: Inside Two Georgia Immigrant Detention Centers revealing evidence of sexual abuse, inadequate medical care, lack of prenatal care for pregnant women, a lack of clean drinking water, and rampant use of solitary confinement, a practice internationally recognized as torture.

“We were kept on almost 24-hour lockdown except for one hour of yard time early in the morning. The building was completely unsanitary,” said Shannon, another woman detained at ICDC for almost a year, long after the allegations of medical abuse. “I spent a few months in one of the main pods of Irwin, but after we complained about the conditions there, they moved us somewhere even worse. This was a trailer, about 20’x10’ that could hold up to about 40 women. There was no way to distance and there were literally mushrooms growing out of the ceiling.”

After serving a prison sentence, Sara, a longtime lawful permanent resident, was transferred to ICDC indefinitely, with no idea when she would see her family again or if she would be deported to a country she had not been to since childhood. After finally being released from ICE custody, she wants everyone still detained at ICDC to have the same chance she’s gotten to rebuild her life. “It has meant so much to be back home with my family. My daughter was only 5 months when I went away—now she is starting middle school! My older son was 11 and is now a grown man serving in the Navy. It has been a little hard to reconnect after all this time, but slowly we are rebuilding our relationship. I was also finally able to meet my grandson. We share the same birthday and I was able to be with him for his second birthday shortly after I got released.”

ICE’s penchant for continued caging of people with past records amounts to an unjust double punishment of people who, by any standard, have already paid their debt to society. “I spent 11 years in prison and felt I had served my time, then I got transferred to Irwin,” Sara said. I didn’t know when I would get released and ended up spending another 6 months locked up. I wasn’t sure what would happen with my immigration case, but I never expected to be put in a place for so long that was basically another prison.”

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Comunidad Estrella: “What is needed is releases not transfers. The solution to closing down Irwin cannot be followed by transferring people to other facilities. People need to be reunited with their loved ones.”

Somos South Georgia: “We are in solidarity with the survivors of ICDC and those who are currently detained there. ICE operations at ICDC must end on or before September 17 and anyone who remains there must be released, not transferred to another facility. Furthermore, we implore the federal government to redistribute funding towards an economic development project that is spearheaded by South Georgia’s working class.”

SisterSong: “No more tearing families apart whether it is at the border through mass incarceration or state sanctioned violence. No more cages. No more laws or programs that try to tell us when or how to have children or build our families. No more talk of law and order and safety when the violence and trauma inflicted on us by this government is causing chaos and death. Immigrant Justice is Reproductive Justice. And we are coming together to say NO MORE to the systemic racism that is unleashing unwarranted havoc on our communities. Closing this detention center and freeing those detained is the only solution.”

Leah Lotto, Senior Staff Attorney, National Center for Law & Economic Justice:

“Detention on its own is a harrowing experience, but detainees at ICDC have reported practices common in ICE detention centers that may constitute forced labor, such as requiring detainees to work to keep the facility up for a dollar a day. It is past time for our federal government to be transparent about whether and when it will make the obvious decision for economic justice, racial justice, and human dignity: granting every human being detained at ICDC their freedom.”

Ariel Prado, Co-Director of Anticarceral Legal Organizing, Innovation Law Lab: “Human beings at ICDC have been subjected to torture, chillingly disguised as medical care, all in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Every day this place stays open, it exposes people to dangerous conditions with no sense of when, if ever, they might be free to reunite with their loved ones. The survivors of ICDC deserve to know when ICE will finally stop using the facility to cage and torment people.”

Samantha Feinstein, Government Accountability Project: “Dawn Wooten, a Government Accountability Project client, risked everything when she spoke about dangerous conditions at ICDC. Despite the government and media interest in the dangerous conditions for workers and detainees, especially women, there have been no consequences for LaSalle Corrections, the government contractor that runs ICDC and several other detention facilities in the US. These delays have life and death consequences. It is time to close the ICDC and hold them accountable for their crimes.”