

To the Justice for Children Coalition, Local Representatives, and Community Members of the San Fernando Valley:

Our communities in the San Fernando Valley and surrounding cities are unequivocally opposed to the building of any detention center in Arleta, or anywhere else in the County of Los Angeles. Our community's message was loud and clear since our first demonstration in front of the proposed location in Arleta; We do NOT want a detention center to be built and we will NOT allow for any type of establishment that incarcerates or disserves immigrant children, their families, and our communities, to be built in Arleta, or anywhere else in Los Angeles County.

In an effort to further inform and protect our communities from those like VisionQuest, who enrich themselves under the guise of our protection, we wish to bring to your attention a series of urgent concerns, which were unfairly dismissed during the last coalition meeting on January 23, 2020 at Vaughn International Studies Academy.

On January 9, 2020, at the first coalition meeting in opposition of the building of any establishment that harms children, our community first met Peter Schey, who was introduced as a legal expert and lead attorney in the "Flores" case, and long-time "immigrant activist".

Schey gave a lengthy presentation on legal approaches and recommendations that were available to us as a community to halt the building of the detention center, which included:

1. The community ignores the building of the detention center and does nothing about it.
2. Community completely opposes the building of a detention center and does whatever is in their power to halt any corporation and/or organization from building any type of detention center in our community.
3. Allow for a "shelter" instead of a prison to be built by VisionQuest based on community terms.

Schey then went into detail explaining what the third option could look like for our community, often referencing as an example his shelter for migrant children in Los Angeles, called 'Casa Libre/Freedom House'.

Schey explained that this shelter would serve as a platform towards family reunification. Community members and attendees were drawn to Schey's third recommendation, believing that a community shelter, similar to 'Casa Libre', would be a hopeful solution in place of a detention center. Community members left the coalition meeting feeling empowered to build a shelter that would be welcoming and safe for migrant children. Many took the initiative, and began to research how shelters, like Schey's 'Casa Libre', provide migrant children a safe transition from a detention center to family reunification. As we began our due diligence research into Schey and 'Casa Libre' however, the results left us shocked and horrified.

Our initial concerns:

1. As documented in the May 2019 Los Angeles Times investigation, Peter Schey has shown a “pattern of neglect” when it comes to the well-being of migrant children in his care.
2. This is not the first time this has happened.
3. Schey’s first shelter, ‘Safe Haven’, was shut down by the City of Los Angeles 10 years ago because according to the Judge in the case, Schey’s organization “does not currently have an intention to operate as a homeless shelter for children.”
4. Since his involvement in the Flores case, Schey has abused his power to profit off of the plight of our migrant children and communities, making millions of dollars in litigation fees, yet neglected to provide the children in his care basic essentials like food and toilet paper, similar to the abuses he accused the government of in the Flores settlement.
5. Schey has shown a history of squandering City monies (our tax dollars) for his benefit since the shutdown of his first shelter ‘Safe Haven’ and presently at ‘Casa Libre’ where there are no minors housed despite it being a shelter licensed for 12-17 year olds, and yet the City has sent hundreds of thousands of dollars there.
6. Peter Schey should not be considered for participation in any discussion relating to the best interests of migrant children, much less be the “Immigrant Advocate” for the Sanctuary City of L.A. leading our community discussions in our fight against VisionQuest.

Our truly appalling discoveries about the City of L.A.’s “Immigrant Advocate”, left us disillusioned, but also outraged, so we decided to take our message to the City Council meeting on January 22, 2020, in order to express our concerns to our own City Council representative, and newly elected Council President, Nury Martinez. Unfortunately, our concerns were not received well and instead met with censorship from Ms. Martinez, who at one point shut the mic off on one of our community members when she began asking about Peter Schey. Not exactly a vote of confidence when one considers Nury has put herself at the forefront of this fight against the detention center.

This unexpected and forceful dismissal by Nury Martinez of legitimate community concerns only strengthened our resolve for answers, and as concerned community members we attended the coalition meeting on January 23, 2020.

At this meeting, Peter Schey was again present, only this time had different recommendations than he had originally proposed, which we found odd. Nonetheless, we indulged his almost hour-long presentation in which he proposed that “The community along with Los Angeles

City and County should undertake a pilot project to provide a network of ‘sanctuary host families’ for detained immigrant children”. While discussing this option, a community member asked a question on the validity of the recommendation pertaining to the release of children by the ORR to “sanctuary host families.” Schey vaguely responded, admitting that this recommendation was not well articulated, and could be flawed, with a need to research more on how this option would work.

As Schey continued discussing his recommendations, our concern for the validity and veracity of his statements increased, given what we had recently discovered about his abuse towards immigrant children in his care. A community member then stood up to ask Schey about the integrity of his work, given the more than 150 citations he has received from CoC Licensing and the City of Los Angeles for violations concerning the wellbeing of immigrant minors in his care at ‘Safe Haven’ and ‘Casa Libre’.

There was immediate push back from those leading the meeting, with Ruben Rodriguez attempting to characterize us as disruptors by singling us out as “your group” instead of the rightfully concerned individual community members that we are. Other concerned community members joined in our demand for answers.

Our concerns began when we, as responsible community members, did our due diligence in researching proposals and individuals impacting our community. We researched Peter Schey and his shelter ‘Casa Libre’ in the hopes of finding out how we could replicate Schey’s shelter model in Arleta, per his own suggestion at our first coalition meeting. What we uncovered in the public domain in the form of news articles, court transcripts, and declarations, is available for anyone to read and speaks for itself, and we share some here.

When we saw our local representatives’ staff members stand up and leave, instead of hearing from concerned constituents, our outrage intensified. Their walking out was extremely disrespectful, as well as suspicious, given that information we found in our investigation also points to our local representatives and the City of Los Angeles as complicit in Schey’s actions by funding and/or supporting his negligence towards migrant children at Casa Libre.

Proposed Solutions:

As San Fernando Valley community members, we are vehemently opposed to any type of detention center being built in our community or anywhere in the County of Los Angeles, but equally opposed to predatory politicians, attorneys, or activists, profiting off of our communities under the guise of our protection. We therefore propose the following:

1. A complete block of ANY establishment that will violate the wellbeing of our migrant children whether it be a detention center, shelter or otherwise.
2. Immediate removal of Peter Schey from the coalition (and as L.A. Immigrant Advocate). While we honor the work that Peter Schey has done in support of the immigrant community

in the past, some of whom are our own family members, given the recent exposure of his concurrent abuses and pattern of neglect, he should not be considered for participation in any discussions relating to the best interests of migrant children, much less be the “Immigrant Advocate” for the Sanctuary City of L.A.

3. Bring in at least two new attorneys with expertise on migrant children and detention centers to provide legal advice, and fact-check the validity of Schey’s prior recommendations, as well as to help our community become well-informed and educated on the process for detained migrant children, and alternatives to detention centers other than shelters.

4. Invite other subject matter experts (social workers, teachers, activists, mental health professionals) to help our community learn about the long-term comprehensive developmental, educational, and socio-emotional needs of these highly vulnerable and traumatized children.

5. Any coalition should be representative of the entire community, which is why we propose adding additional members to the coalition, making it more intergenerational and diverse.

6. Our previous meeting could have been better structured, and our concerns could have been addressed in a more effective manner. However, the community was not given space to ask questions or engage in direct dialogue with the folks running the meeting. We recommend that time be reserved at all meetings for community members to comment and/or ask questions.

7. Opening space for questions improves communication with the community, which is something we must keep in mind, since our SF Valley community does not have the strongest organizing history. The flyers have had ‘Justice for Children’ as the organization behind these efforts, even though the communications have been coming from Ruben Rodriguez from Pueblo Y Salud. The community is confused as to whether ‘Justice for Children’ is an actual organization, or if that is the name that was given to the coalition- this needs to be clarified so we know who is leading us in these efforts.

8. At our last meeting we received the agenda and the recommendations document that same day. The meeting information was sent two days earlier, which may not be enough time for community members to make necessary arrangements to attend. We believe that sending out a proposed agenda on the information to be discussed at the meeting in advance will help the community and those running the meeting be better prepared. This will prevent confusion like we saw at our last meeting where folks were unaware that part of our first meeting agenda would no longer be part of the recommendations moving forward.

9. We would like to see our elected representatives attend in person. It’s been very discouraging to see that none of our local representatives have been present at either of our coalition meetings. Rather, they have sent their staff to serve as liaisons between themselves and our community. Members of our community also have families and other obligations.

Nonetheless, we sacrifice to be present at these meetings because these issues truly matter and affect us all. Our local representatives' absence at our meetings leads us to believe that their fight for our communities and against the detention center is only rhetorical.

10. Become a catalyst for organizing in our communities. The San Fernando Valley isn't known for our organizing power. If we hope to change this, here is our chance to empower and equip our community with the tools to collectively stand against the building of immigrant prisons, but also to stand up in the future on any matters that may adversely impact our communities, and to help dismantle the systems that intend to keep us oppressed.

We are community members and our concerns are valid. We wish to be heard, and to ensure that our community is given the chance to make informed decisions. If there is nothing to fear, there is nothing to hide. We look forward to meeting with you again in solidarity against the building of the detention center and for the protection of our children.

Sign the Petition Here: <http://chng.it/mnmVZFZTYq>

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