



California Faith Leaders Letter to Attorney General Becerra

July 7, 2020

Attorney General's Office
California Department of Justice
1300 I Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Attorney General Becerra,

We are faith leaders, ministers, rabbis, imams, and people of faith from across California. Our primary concern today is those whose lives are impacted by immigration detention in our state. Many of us are engaged in supporting the families of people detained who are seeking reunification with their loved ones. As a network of sanctuary and immigrant supporting congregations, we also provide support to people upon release. We write with urgent concern about the human rights abuses and deteriorating conditions inside the Adelanto Detention Facility, and other ICE facilities, and are seeking your support as Attorney General.

In accordance with your office and your commitment, we prayerfully urge you to uphold human rights and dignity in the following ways:

- 1) Inspect the health and safety standards of the Adelanto Detention Facility and other CA facilities, as mandated by AB 103.
- 2) Investigate the deaths that have recently occurred in immigration detention facilities: the unconfirmed death in Adelanto on May 31st; Mr. Ahn in Mesa Verde; and Mr. Escobar Mejia in Otay Mesa.
- 3) Use the state's powers to regulate detention facilities operating within its borders in order to ensure public health and safety.
- 4) Hold private operators accountable for actions which violate the terms of their federal contracts and result in civil or criminal liability.

We appeal to you as the Attorney General of our state - an elected official who is charged with investigating and reporting back to the Legislature, the Governor, and the public about the conditions of people who are detained in public and privately operated immigration detention facilities in California. We look to you as head of the Department of Justice to ensure the public is safeguarded and that California and civil rights laws are upheld. We bring our concerns to you with confidence, based on your track record of supporting the safety of immigrants and their families. You have been a voice of integrity in keeping with your mandate as Attorney General to protect the people and interests of the state of California.

Our requests are based on the following concerns about violations of human rights and human dignity at Adelanto and other ICE detention centers. Your detention report of February 2019 found significant concerns in detention centers including “difficulties with access to medical and mental health care, increasing the risk to detainees of major medical or mental health incidents.” In June 2019, the federal Office of the Inspector General investigated Adelanto and reported “immediate risks” and “egregious violations of detention standards” at Adelanto, including nooses in detainee cells, overly restrictive segregation, inadequate medical care, unreported security incidents, and food safety issues. Since these scathing reports, conditions have not improved. Instead we are seeing increased risk of health and life. The private operators of these facilities are acting outside the normal scope of federal contractors when they violate their contracts, and thus state authorities need to do something in order to protect the safety of our state.

- ❖ Failure to protect from Covid 19 is a violation of human rights and dignity. To date, there are now 3 confirmed Covid-19 cases of persons detained in Adelanto. Detainees inside Adelanto have pleaded for personal protective equipment, masks, gloves, hand sanitizing, antibacterial soap and cleaning materials but were ignored. This sparked hunger strikes within Adelanto. Solitary confinement and isolation have been used as punishment against hunger strikers.

Luis, an immigrant father, 15 year resident of Riverside county who was just released from Adelanto has testified to us:

“GEO employees installed hand sanitizing dispenser units in my housing section but they contained no liquid at all. I was given a mask but only at the time of my release from detention. Once we started hunger striking, we began experiencing the retaliation from guards. We were kept separated and isolated from each other. No phone calls were allowed even to our attorneys. We were only distributed food once a day. I am grateful to be back with my family but I am also worried for those who are still detained. Many are sick and need to be released.”

Let us be clear, unsafe conditions and increased cases of COVID-19 in detention centers impacts surrounding communities and local hospitals. Because these private companies are most concerned with protecting their stocks, they have an incentive to suppress information, testing, and treatment in their facilities. California state authorities need to act for the safety of all Californians.

- ❖ Toxic Chemical Sprays is a violation of human rights and dignity: GEO and ICE are routinely spraying HDQ Neutral Spray inside confined housing units of Adelanto despite the manufacturer's guidelines that this disinfectant should only be used outdoors and in well-ventilated areas. People detained are experiencing nose bleeds, fainting, headaches, skin rashes, stomach pains, swollen eyes, and painful breathing in reaction to the chemical. After experiencing significant retaliation for hunger strikes in detention, detainees suspect that the use of this chemical is an additional act of retaliation.

- ❖ Deaths inside Detention is a violation of human rights and dignity: The month of May saw two deaths inside private immigration detention facilities in the state of California. The first was Carlos Escobar Mejia, a 57 year old man who died from exposure to COVID-19 at the Otay Mesa facility, owned and operated by the for-profit CoreCivic. The second was Chuong Woong Ahn, a 74 year old man who died inside Mesa Verde Detention Facility, owned and operated by GEO group. In addition, several persons detained in Adelanto reported to us that on May 31st, there was a man who suffered what appeared to be a deadly heart attack. The security guards immediately isolated those who witnessed and attended to the man to avoid peoples' ability to discuss and investigate how the situation was handled. We are asking for your investigation into this possible death and the other two confirmed deaths in immigration detention.

- ❖ Failure to drastically reduce numbers is a violation of human rights and dignity: In April, 2020 the United States District Court in Los Angeles ordered a drastic reduction in the number of detainees at Adelanto be decreased "to such a level that would allow the remaining detainees to maintain a social distance of six feet from each other at all times and at all places, including while sleeping, eating, showering, and going about other daily activities." This order has since been stalled by ICE at the expense of the well-being of everyone held inside the facility and surrounding communities susceptible to the spread of Covid-19.

- ❖ GEO's pattern of operating above the law is a violation of human rights and dignity: Last year, in your review of "Immigrant Detention in California," you commented about ICE and GEO's unwillingness to comply with the government, demonstrated in their refusal to allow your team to speak with detainees and in their providing you with limited access during your two-week requested visit. GEO's 15 year contract renewals last December undermined AB 32 legislation that mandated the phase out of private detention in California effective January 2020. Instead of the phase out of these for-profit prisons and detention centers, which are now deadly, we continue to see GEO operate and violate human rights. In addition, GEO is currently proceeding with plans to expand and increase beds in Adelanto by 750 as well as in Mesa Verde. GEO is operating outside the normal scope of federal contractors - they cannot be allowed to operate and act outside of the law and in defiance of our government institutions.

We prayerfully urge you, Attorney General Becerra, to use your power to investigate and enforce the laws. While we have a clear understanding that immigration is a federal issue, we underscore the authority that California has to undertake the following measures, which do not interfere with immigration enforcement or the operations of the federal government.

Once again, we prayerfully urge you to uphold human dignity in the following ways:

- 1.) Inspect the health and safety standards of the Adelanto Detention Facility and other CA facilities, as mandated by AB 103.
- 2) Investigate the deaths that have recently occurred in immigration detention facilities: the unconfirmed death in Adelanto on May 31st; Mr. Ahn in Mesa Verde; and Mr. Escobar Mejia in Otay Mesa.

- 3.) Use the state's powers to regulate detention facilities operating within its borders in order to ensure public health and safety.
- 4.) Hold private operators accountable for actions which violate the terms of their federal contracts and result in civil or criminal liability.

This letter is Co-sponsored by Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, Bend the Arc: Jewish Action California, CAIR-CA, Sisters of Mercy, The Islamic

of Southern California, Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, Center for Spiritual Living Riverside, Lutheran Of Public Policy-California, United Church of the Valley Murrieta, Center for Spiritual Living Temecula, Unitarian Universalist Justice Ministries of California, Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, United Church of Christ- Northern CA Nevada Conference, Catholic Association of Latino Leaders, Sanctuary Task Force of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles

. As organizations across the state representing an array of religious institutions and traditions, we are concerned on a moral level about this continued pattern of systemic violence, racism and xenophobia. We are concerned for people's physical and mental health as well as their spiritual health. Adelanto Detention Facility, and other private detention centers, are sites of pain and suffering for our immigrant neighbors and a hazard to public safety and public health. We can no longer remain silent about this human rights disaster.

All people deserve to be treated with dignity, respect and mercy. Everyone deserves the right to live.

We ask that you be guided by this sacred text from the book of Deuteronomy 30:15:

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, or death and destruction."

You have the power to protect life by advocating for the life of immigrants or to choose death by turning away and not holding accountable and liable those whose inhumane treatment is leading to death. Please count on our support to you and your office in any way that could be helpful to these efforts.

Sincerely,



Rev. Deborah Lee

Executive Director

Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity





Other Co-sponsors: All Saints Church Pasadena, People Without Borders Justice Temple, and Oscar Romero and Simone Weil Catholic Worker House.