

Texas opens door to family detention child care licenses under lowered standards

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(AUSTIN, Texas) — In a quietly announced decision that could set a dangerous precedent for child care in the state, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission has approved a proposed rule to reduce childcare standards that allow licensing for-profit family detention camps in South Texas to move forward.

In rewriting the rules and lowering the standards, state officials have ignored public outcry and a groundswell of opposition against family detention itself and the proposal to license them in particular. An Open Records Request obtained by Grassroots Leadership showed that the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services received more than 5,000 pages worth of comments, letters, emails and testimony, which were overwhelmingly against adopting the proposed rule. That opposition came from Texas residents, formerly detained mothers, child welfare organizations, faith leaders, and survivors of Japanese internment.

Comments from advocates:

“By licensing these prison facilities as childcare centers, the state merely puts its official seal of approval on the well-documented deplorable treatment of children and mothers detained there. The list of offenses is long and includes reported sexual assaults, grossly delayed and inadequate medical attention and care, inaction and retaliation against complaints, isolation, and other practices that endanger the lives of children and pregnant women,” said Dr. Laura Guerra-Cardus, associate director of Children’s Defense Fund-Texas.

“Licensing family detention centers does not protect children, it protects for-profit, private prison corporations,” said Cristina Parker, immigration programs director at Grassroots Leadership, which successfully sued the state in order to ensure a public comment process on the issue.

"Governor Abbott, Commissioner Traylor, and Judge Specia have decided that it is more important to incarcerate refugee children than to protect Texas foster kids, provide services to people with disabilities, or honor our elders with the care they merit. What a tragic and cynical betrayal of public trust," said Virginia Raymond, an Austin-based attorney who represented families detained at Karnes.

“Children do not belong in detention centers under any circumstances. The Department’s decision to allow for the licensure as “childcare facilities” of immigrant detention centers runs afoul to its own mission,” said Marisa Bono, MALDEF Southwest Regional Counsel. “That the Department would prioritize meddling into a federal immigration debate over ensuring the protection of these already-vulnerable refugee children is a gross misuse of public dollars, a stain on its public integrity, and contradicts Texas values.”

“We are dismayed that the welfare and human rights of Central American mothers and children — and now possibly, also Syrian refugee families who are coming through the Texas system — are being jeopardized,” said Rachel Freed, Vice President and Chief Program Officer, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. “These families and unaccompanied minors are pawns caught in a terrible national political chess game where Governor Abbott and the Obama Administration are colluding to keep the family detention apparatus going.”

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Grassroots Leadership is an Austin, Texas-based national organization that works to end prison profiteering and reduce reliance on criminalization and detention through direct action, organizing, research, and public education.

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