What is Family Detention?

Since the creation of Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2003, approximately 2.5 million individuals have passed through ICE detention facilities in a network of over 250 jails and private prisons. ICE, a branch of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has requested funding to construct 8,750 additional detention beds for undocumented migrant families with children. Prior to 2014, the only family detention center was located in Berks, Pennsylvania, and detained less than 250 parents and their children. The Obama Administration largely ended family detention in 2009 after a sustained campaign of opposition against the T. Don Hutto Family Residential Facility in Taylor, Texas.

Between June and August 2014 alone, the detention of immigrant families increased dramatically—by over 1200 percent. First, the Artesia Family Residential Center opened on June 27, 2014, holding up to 672 mothers and their children at an average cost of $266 per person per day. The average age of a child incarcerated at Artesia is six years old. Then, the government converted the Karnes County Civil Detention Center in Texas into a family detention facility and began detaining families on August 1, 2014. The newly-converted family detention center can house up to 532 people at a cost of $140 a day. ICE also is planning to build another 2,400-bed facility in Dilley, Texas, by the end of 2014.

Why is Family Detention Harmful?

There are no licensing requirements for family detention facilities. Standards for family detention are based almost entirely on an adult criminal model. Documented problems include substandard medical care, abusive treatment and neglect by personnel, inadequate access to legal services and law libraries, inadequate opportunities for visitation and outdoor recreation. For example, the Karnes County Civil Detention Center, operated by the GEO Group, was at the center of a scandal over the denial of treatment for Nayely, a seven-year old girl with brain cancer detained inside with her mother. Detention has been documented as psychologically damaging and completely inappropriate for toddlers and children.

What is CIVIC’s Role?

CIVIC’s theory of change begins with empathy. The heart of CIVIC’s work is community-based and volunteer-run immigration detention visitation programs; CIVIC visitors equip detained immigrants with the tools to endure detention, pursue legal relief, and regain their freedom. These programs also engage volunteers in the problems inherent in immigration detention, and over time, transform them into committed and empathetic advocates.

CIVIC is working to start a visitation program at the family detention facility in Artesia, New Mexico. This program will build upon CIVIC’s network of 33 visitation programs in 17 states, and it will be the first visitation program in a family detention facility in the country. We hope you will help us provide care and support to mothers and their children.