

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Detention centers don't reflect well on our country

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A recent wave of detainee hunger strikes has hit immigration detention facilities, including in Orange County and San Bernardino County.

On Nov. 4, 26 asylum seekers at the Adelanto Detention Facility began refusing meals in protest of prolonged confinement. Later that month, 35 detainees at the James A. Musick Facility near Irvine and Theo Lacy Facility in Orange launched hunger strikes.

The protests raise important issues, such as the necessity of treating immigrants like criminals, detaining them for long periods of time in facilities ripe for abuse.

As the infamous Stanford Prison Experiments demonstrated, giving otherwise decent, normal people control over others can lead not only to abuses of power, but the dehumanization of prisoners. It is not shocking, then, that immigration detention facilities, particularly Theo Lacy and Adelanto, have been consistently called out for patterns of abuse and neglect.

Many abuses have been documented by the group Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement. On Dec. 4, CIVIC presented an official complaint to the Department of Homeland Security on behalf of 10 current or former detained immigrants at Theo Lacy. Physical abuse, racially charged verbal abuse, medical neglect and isolated confinement are among the many issues documented by the group.

“I was locked up 23 hours a day without access to a phone and a real connection to the outside. When I would ask for basic necessities, such as a cup of hot water, I was arbitrarily denied,” Luis Chavez told CIVIC. He was deported to El Salvador in August after a year and a half of detention.

Erwin Amiel Melendez, brought to the United States from Guatemala in 1962 as a child, spent time in both Theo Lacy and Adelanto, among other facilities, until he was granted a deferral of removal in August. Melendez has a criminal record, though, as he points out, he has already served his time, rendering his subsequent treatment in immigration detention excessive.

He said of Adelanto, “I think of hunger. I stayed hungry. The medical [care], they have a lot of red tape for everything.”

When asked about Theo Lacy, however, it's clear which was worse. “O.C. is a throwback to the stone ages.” He said he spent most of his time confined in the restrictive Module I. “Guys come out of there with post-traumatic stress.”

A spokesperson for ICE asserted that “the agency has a zero tolerance policy for any kind of abusive or inappropriate behavior in its facilities.”

Without offering details, the Homeland Security's Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties confirmed that, besides the complaint by CIVIC, it has been investigating claims about conditions at both facilities. While that's certainly welcomed, Christina Fialho, co-executive director of CIVIC, argues there's still a problem of DHS essentially investigating itself. “ICE has effectively adopted a head-in-the-sand approach,” she said.

It's hard to argue with her, given the consistent evidence of abuses in detention facilities. Just three years ago, the Detention Watch Network declared Theo Lacy among the 10 worst detention facilities in the U.S. Seemingly little has changed. As for the Adelanto Detention Facility, in July, two dozen members of Congress

raised concerns about the treatment of detainees. In October, CIVIC and the Detention Watch Network issued a report finding consistent patterns of abuse.

There are humane, evidence-based alternatives to detention, including partnerships with community-based nonprofits to ensure compliance with court orders, but the big obstacle for reform will be money. Orange County receives roughly \$25 million a year to house immigrants, while Adelanto boasts the largest detention center in the country.

As a purportedly civilized, advanced nation predicated on respect for individual rights, we ought to do better than creating a system where asylum-seekers feel the need to hunger strike just to be heard.

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