

FIALHO: Obama's immigration-lockup quota

By Christina Fialho

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Illustration by Greg Groesch/The Washington Times

We as a nation should be deeply troubled that President Obama, who declared January 2014 as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, is continuing to indefinitely imprison victims of human trafficking and other immigrants in civil immigration detention. Feb. 1 is National Freedom Day, but my friends and community members are not free.

Ana was the first person I met when I began visiting people in immigration detention a few years ago through the nonprofit I co-founded, Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement. Ana, who asked to remain anonymous, is a victim of human trafficking. Her traffickers bound and raped her before the U.S. government imprisoned her as part of the immigration detention lockup quota. In immigration detention, Ana was retraumatized.

She was held in solitary confinement for more than 14 days. She was transported to her immigration court hearings, bound at her wrists, waist and ankles by a metal chain that was linked to the women in front of her.

Our tax dollars paid for Ana's detention, a total of more than \$100,000 for 621 days. Instead of using this money to support her transition from modern-day slavery to freedom, the U.S. government stripped her of her liberty. An immigration judge eventually granted her a special visa for victims of human trafficking, and the U.S. government released her.

Mark Reid, a veteran of the U.S. armed forces, is in immigration detention today in Massachusetts. He is one of the 34,000 immigrants our government is imprisoning right now to meet the lockup quota. Mr. Reid came to the United States at age 14. He has lived here for more than 35 years as a green-card holder.

He has two U.S. citizen children. Mr. Reid has now spent about 444 days in immigration detention. This has cost taxpayers approximately \$60,000 per year, or an average of \$165 per day.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the interior-enforcement agency of the Department of Homeland Security, must confine at least 34,000 people in immigration detention each day to satisfy the lockup quota.

The number itself is completely arbitrary, and ICE is the only law enforcement agency with a quota for the number of people it must keep locked up daily.

The quota originally passed in 2007 by Congress as part of the Department of Homeland Security's 2007 appropriation. Then-Sen. Robert C. Byrd, West Virginia Democrat, was chairman of the homeland security subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee when the lockup quota passed. In 2009, Byrd also inserted a change into the Homeland Security Department's annual spending bill, which has been approved every year since, requiring ICE to maintain and fill 34,000 beds. Not surprisingly, Byrd received from GEO Group, a private prison company that lobbied for the lockup quota, a campaign contribution in 2006.

Now, GEO Group receives more than \$180 million guaranteed each year from Homeland Security appropriations, and the government spends more than \$5 billion annually on ICE operations. Perhaps the most devastating effect of this quota is that it prevents nongovernmental community groups able and willing to manage less costly and more efficient alternatives to detention from operating. Alternatives give our families and local communities an opportunity to care for one another so we no longer need the federal government to funnel our tax dollars into a lockup system that chips away at our humanity.

Alternatives include everything from ankle monitors to community-based supervision programs. The programs work. At an average cost of from 17 cents to \$22 per person per day, the programs offer a fiscally responsible alternative to detention.

They also offer a way for families to remain intact, which is good for our children and our communities. That is why a large and diverse collection of groups, including the Heritage Foundation, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Conference of Chief Justices, the Vera Institute of Justice and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have endorsed alternatives to detention.

However, the congressional quota makes alternatives unavailable to the 34,000 people locked up daily.

At a time when our country is \$17 trillion in debt, the Obama administration has detained more people than any other administration in U.S. history. It's time to stop this wasteful spending, and this inhumane and degrading response to migration. In furtherance of National Freedom Day, it's time to end the immigration detention lockup quota.

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