

REPORT

Why Did One of America's Most Controversial Immigration Detention Facilities Get Even Bigger?

Some lawmakers and outside critics say detainees are being denied medical care. The Obama administration expanded the privately-run center where they are being held anyway.

BY [MEGAN ALPERT](#)

NOVEMBER 5, 2015



In July, 29 members of Congress sent a [letter](#) to the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and its Immigration and Customs Enforcement branch urging them to halt the planned expansion of the controversial, privately run Adelanto Detention Facility in

California. The letter also called for an independent investigation into allegations of systemic medical neglect and abuse there, which an ICE internal watchdog alleged to have contributed to the death of at least one detainee.

The letter campaign wasn't enough. Washington allowed Adelanto to add 640 new beds, making it the second-largest immigration detention facility in the United States, according to the nonprofit Detention Watch Network. The advocacy group and a partner organization — called Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) — just released [a new report](#) accusing the center's owners, the Florida-based GEO Group, of running a facility where detainees are regularly denied access to medical care, lack legal representation, and are subject to needlessly long stays in detention. The report, released on Tuesday, called Adelanto “a hostile environment where detained individuals are afraid to file grievances, where medical needs are neglected, and where staff retaliate when individuals attempt to assert basic human and constitutional rights.”

Representative Judy Chu (D-Calif.), who has visited Adelanto as well as another GEO facility, told [Foreign Policy](#) that the report confirmed her fears about Adelanto, which was built in 2011 as part of the Obama administration's escalating push to step up immigration enforcement, including a sharp increase in the number of deportations.

“Enough is enough,” Chu said in an interview. “This report just documents what we thought was true, which is that they are negligent, and we have to stop the ability for private companies to profit off of detainees.”

On its website, GEO Group describes itself as “the world's leading provider of correctional, detention, and community reentry services with 105 facilities, approximately 87,000 beds, and 20,500 employees around the globe,” including the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa.

The company declined an interview request.

In a statement, it said: “GEO's facilities, including the Adelanto Detention Facility, provide high quality services in safe, secure, and humane residential environments, and our company strongly refutes allegations to the contrary.”

Critics say the case of Gerardo Corrales, a paralyzed 20-year-old who was detained at Adelanto for over nine months, casts significant doubts about those claims. Corrales was born in Mexico and crossed into the United States in 1998, when he was 2 years old. He was paralyzed in a drive-by shooting in May 2014 and then detained by ICE in February after being arrested in January. Corrales says that he was charged with illegal possession of both Xanax and of a weapon; he pleaded guilty to having the anti-anxiety medication without a prescription, and the gun charge was later dropped. During his time at Adelanto, Corrales says staff there refused him physical therapy appointments, sufficient quantities of catheters, a change of clothes when a urinary tract infection caused him to wet his pants, or assistance with daily activities or when he fell out of his wheelchair.

“They don't care if you're in pain ... they basically just wait until you're dying,” Corrales told [FP](#) in a phone interview while still in detention. He was released on bond Tuesday.

“They don’t care if you’re in pain ... they basically just wait until you’re dying,” Corrales told FP in a phone interview while still in detention. He was released on bond Tuesday.

Both the congressional letter and the report discuss Corrales’s case. They also tell the story of Fernando Dominguez, a detainee at Adelanto who died of pneumonia in 2012 after “egregious errors” on the part of Adelanto staff, according to an investigation by ICE’s Office of Detention Oversight. Another Adelanto detainee, Raul Ernesto Morales-Ramos, died this April at 44, apparently of [untreated intestinal cancer](#), which advocates attribute to GEO’s failure to diagnose and treat the disease.

An investigation into Morales-Ramos’s death is ongoing, but the results have yet to be released by ICE. In their letter, Chu and her colleagues said initial reports “raise significant questions” about whether GEO’s alleged lack of attention contributed to his death. Corrales, for his part, believes he came close to death at Adelanto as well. He developed a urinary tract infection in March, after he was given insufficient disposable catheters. The staff at Adelanto limited his supply such that he was forced to wash the catheters in the sink and use them again. Blaine Kristo, a urologist at Mercy Medical Center in Maryland, said that reusing catheters most likely “increased his risk of developing a significant infection.”

Virginia Kice, a spokeswoman for ICE, confirmed that Corrales was only prescribed 90 catheters per month but said that Corrales could “obtain additional supplies as needed upon request.” Corrales said that this has not been the case. In an interview, he also claimed that treatment was delayed when he started showing signs of an infection and that hospitalization was denied until he became extremely ill.

The denial of medical supplies and treatment has been a theme in the criticism of Adelanto. The stories detailed in the “Abuse in Adelanto” report range from a man with a violent seizure condition being denied a foam helmet to a detainee being denied treatment for a hip infection, which resulted in a life-threatening condition and a six-week hospitalization.

Andrew Lorenzen-Strait, deputy assistant director for ICE’s custody programs, told FP that if “we had any reports of substandard medical care at a facility like Adelanto, a quick, urgent, and prompt remedial action would be taken to ensure that the facility is line our detention standards.”

That’s hard to square with the fact that a steady stream of reports by outside groups have raised detailed concerns about Adelanto.

Michael Kaufman is an attorney for the ACLU who put together another [letter](#) to DHS this May that was signed by ten NGOs and legal service providers. The letter asked the government to halt the expansion of the facility and launch an independent investigation into claims of medical abuse. He told FP that the ACLU has seen “a pattern of people being told by the medical staff and GEO staff, ‘We’re not going to give you that treatment because you’re going to be deported anyway.’” Kaufman calls the denial of care “completely inhumane and improper.”

In a June letter to Kaufman, ICE said that although inspections had found “instances of non-compliance” with the set of standards that the government rolled out in 2011, “historically, The GEO Group has shown a consistent willingness to timely [*sic*] correct deficiencies and areas of non-compliance.”

In a statement, ICE said that “all facilities authorized to hold long-term immigration detainees are subject to rigorous, regular inspections to ensure the welfare of those housed there.”

In a statement, ICE said that “all facilities authorized to hold long-term immigration detainees are subject to rigorous, regular inspections to ensure the welfare of those housed there.” In a separate statement, GEO Group said that they “[employ] several full-time, on-site contract monitors who have a physical presence at each of GEO’s facilities.”

Mary Small, the policy director at Detention Watch Network, said “the inspections process is basically a sham,” in part because visits by the inspectors are announced in advance and in part because the nominal watchdogs are “mostly looking for the existence of written policies, not whether or not they’re actually implemented.”

Detention Watch Network co-released an additional [report](#) in October on the ICE inspection policies titled “Lives in Peril: How Ineffective Inspections Make ICE Complicit in Immigration Detention Abuse.”

The advocacy group and other observers say that the fee structure in GEO Group’s contract with ICE and the city of Adelanto encourage the government to fill as many beds as possible. The [contract](#) guarantees GEO Group payment for a minimum of 75 percent occupancy, which ICE confirmed includes 1,455 beds after the expansion, whether or not those beds are filled. Each of those beds cost the government \$111.72 per day, according to ICE. That means Washington and Adelanto give the company at least \$162,522 per day or \$59 million per year regardless of how heavily the facility is being used.

Corrales’s family say they are going to do everything possible to prevent him from being deported to Mexico, where his mother, Hildiberta Corrales, says he would have no relatives to look after him.

Corrales says that this experience has changed him — that he feels angry more and sometimes has thoughts of self-harm. He was released Tuesday after a month in solitary confinement due to getting into a fight with a man who he says made fun of him for being in wheelchair.

Corrales says that in solitary there was no one around to pick him up when he fell out of his wheelchair. Still, he said that he was glad to be held alone, without human company. “I used to like to talk to people, but now I don’t really feel like talking to anybody,” he said. “Just because of everything that’s happened, I feel embarrassed.”

The case has been an ordeal for his entire family. His mother, who does not have legal immigration status and works cleaning hotel rooms, raised about \$3,000 of his \$10,000 bond through a GoFundMe campaign. The rest of the money came from loans from friends. However, his bond is on the low end of the scale for Adelanto. According to the “Abuse in Adelanto” report, bonds at the detention center can be as high as \$45,000, more than many undocumented immigrants earn in a full year.