

ICE 'ramping up' detention center in Bakersfield

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It's been an on-again, off-again prison for decades.

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But after a \$10 million renovation, the Mesa Verde Detention Facility on Golden State Avenue in Bakersfield is "on" yet again, this time housing undocumented immigrants facing deportation or otherwise awaiting decisions on their immigration cases.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials say the detention center provides greatly improved conditions for detainees in the agency's Northern California region. But immigrant advocates worry detainees held at Mesa Verde will become even more isolated from affordable or pro bono legal representation that tends to be clustered in the San Francisco Bay area, where immigration hearings are held.

Operated for ICE by private prison contractor the GEO Group, the 400-bed detention center invited reporters and photographers to tour the facility Thursday.

Virginia Kice, a spokeswoman for ICE, said the 33,500-square-foot facility opened last month and is still "ramping up." While the center can house a maximum of 300 men and 100 women, on Thursday it held 186 detainees, 11 of them women.

Most of the detainees are foreign nationals who have been convicted of a crime and have served their sentence.

No one at Mesa Verde is serving a sentence in a criminal case, she said.

Most people with pending immigration cases are not detained, but ICE determines "certain individuals should be held in custody while their cases are being adjudicated," Kice said.

On any given day, that number stands at about 26,000 nationwide.

TOUR

As Mesa Verde Warden Ronald Murray, ICE Deputy Field Office Director Erik Bonnar and GEO's Western Region Office Vice President James Black led reporters through the building, they pointed out several rooms with video conferencing technology to conduct remote hearings with immigration judges in San Francisco.

Detainees may also meet with attorneys or speak with them via unmonitored telephones in the rooms.

"We're very accommodating when lawyers want to come down here to meet with their clients," Murray said.

Detainees are outfitted with red, orange or blue clothing, indicating their relative risk categories of high, medium and low.

The center boasts full-time nurses and a part-time physician and psychiatrist on staff.

Three meals per day are served to detainees, who may volunteer to work in the kitchen, the laundry or in other capacities for about \$1 per day.

Outdoor and indoor recreation are available, and while detainees do not have access to the open Internet, they do have access to LexisNexis for legal research.

Each of the "dorm-style" detention areas holds 100 detainees. During Thursday's visit through the sparsely populated women's section, detainees quietly read or studied paperwork connected to their cases.

ICE officials asked photographers not to shoot identifiable photos of detainees, but said reporters could interview them at a later date with permission from the detainee.

ISOLATION

Ilyce Shugall, an attorney with Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto, which offers free legal services to detainees who cannot afford it, said she and others have grave concerns that already isolated detainees will be even less likely to receive legal assistance now that they are housed five hours from the traditional attorney pool.

"It now becomes prohibitively expensive and difficult for attorneys who do detention work," she said.

It was already an uphill battle for those doing pro bono work, but even those receiving pay at affordable rates will find it more difficult to represent clients at such long distances.

Of course, phone calls are one option, and her group is in talks with ICE about possibly using the video conferencing system for attorney-client communication.

"Most practicing attorneys I know believe it is important to be able to meet with your client face-to-face," Shugall said.

That is especially true with people who have suffered trauma or are struggling with mental health issues, she said.

Christina Mansfield, co-executive director of Bay area-based Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement, agrees with Shugall.

About 85 percent of immigrants in detention nationally do not have attorney representation, Mansfield said in an email.

"In Northern California, there are a plethora of nonprofit organizations and law school clinics that provide legal services."

She's also concerned that detainees at Mesa Verde will not have the opportunity to be transferred to San Francisco for their court hearings.

"Instead, they will remain in the facility and appear before the judge remotely by a video-teleconferencing system," she said. "This raises grave concerns about whether people in detention will have access to fair hearings, as they will not be in the same room with their attorneys or the judge, and the video technology is prone to frequent malfunctions."