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[Print Page](#)

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Lawmakers seek to halt detention center expansion

ADELANTO — A group of lawmakers have asked the federal government to halt the expansion of a High Desert correctional facility.

On Tuesday, Rep. Judy Chu, D-Monterey Park, and 28 other Congressional representatives called on the federal government to stop the expansion of the Adelanto Detention Center.

In a signed letter sent to Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials and the U.S. Justice Department, the lawmakers asked the Justice Department to begin an investigation into California's largest immigrant detention center. They also asked to halt the expansion because of reports of "medical negligence" at the privately run facility.

The letter also asks the Adelanto Detention Facility and ICE to stop the ongoing transfer of gay and female transgender and bisexual detainees into the center.

"ICE takes very seriously the health, safety and welfare of those in our care," ICE spokeswoman Virginia Kice informed the Daily Press via email on Tuesday. "The agency is committed to ensuring that individuals in our custody receive timely and appropriate medical treatment."

Kice said ICE's detention standards are designed to provide onsite and remote access to quality medical health care for all detainees.

In June, the Daily Press cited an ICE spokeswoman who said the 640-bed expansion at the Adelanto facility would enable the housing of 259 women, a first for the center.

ICE officials said the Adelanto expansion will substantially increase the agency's capacity to house female immigrant detainees in the regional, seven-county Los Angeles area, where there are just about 100 beds for women and currently under 30 available.

In the letter, lawmakers mentioned the death of two immigrant detainees and wrote that there have been consistent reports documenting "GEO's failure to respond and to adequately address the health and mental concerns of detainees."

According to the letter, GEO Group failed to provide adequate medical care to Fernando Dominguez, which resulted in his death in 2012. ICE's Office of Professional Responsibility determined that Dominguez's death was caused by "egregious errors" committed by the center's medical staff. The letter also says that Raul Ernesto-Ramos, a detainee for five years, "died after GEO failed to diagnose and treat his intestinal cancer."

The six-page letter also mentions many cases of alleged neglect, including that of Gerardo Correlas, a partially paralyzed 19-year-old who developed a urinary tract infection "after GEO's failure to sanitize catheters."

GEO Group officials could not be reached for comment.

The letter said the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, the American Immigration Lawyers Association, Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) and other organizations working with detainees at the center detailed a series of troubling medical cases at the facility.

Among them: The denial of medically-necessary headgear for a detainee with severe epilepsy and the denial of surgery to correct mobility issues in a stroke victim's arm.

The letter closes with a request to halt the center's expansion and any plans to transfer or detain women and LGBT individuals. It also asks for the appointment of an investigator with the Department of Justice to examine the delivery of health care at the center.

Other requests include the appointment of an investigator with the Department of Homeland Security to inspect and ensure the health and safety of current and future detainees. And finally, to provide a civil rights group with a pro bono telephone extension so the community may document and update lawmakers on problems at the center.

Christina Fialho, co-founder/executive director of CIVIC, told the Daily Press that the GEO Group has severely abused its unchecked powers at Adelanto.

"Our federal government can no longer ignore the medical failures at this facility," Fialho said. "We join our Congressional representatives in calling on ICE to halt the expansion of this facility."

Visit www.vvdailypress.com to read the Congressional representatives' letter to ICE.

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