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## Locals gather to protest prison expansion

ADELANTO — In a protest against the expansion of the Adelanto Detention Facility, specifically the addition of women and proposed transfer of transgender people, a group of locals gathered for a vigil across from the facility Friday evening.

In June, the Daily Press cited an ICE spokeswoman who said the 640-bed expansion would enable the facility to house 259 women. Friday's local vigil coordinator and Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) Independent Monitoring and Policy Advocate Vickie Mena said that this transfer of women is "heartbreaking" since the facility has not proven that it can adequately care for them. In addition, she said that many of these women will be pulled far away from family and have a difficult time adjusting emotionally.

In a signed letter sent to Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials and the U.S. Justice Department, a group of lawmakers asked for the cessation of expansion of the facility, which is the state's largest immigrant detention center, and asked for its investigation.

The letter also asked for the facility and ICE to stop the ongoing transfer of gay and female transgender and bisexual detainees into the center.

Mena said the detention is especially unsafe for LGBTQ immigrants since they often encounter sexual abuse, physical violence and extended isolation in government and privately-run facilities.

Mena said that Adelanto Detention Facility has not only denied the Friends of Adelanto group from visiting for various "excuses," but has also denied an attorney access, which has made it the subject of a potential lawsuit.

Both the letter from lawmakers and the protesters Friday cited the death of two Adelanto Detention Facility immigrant detainees within the past four years as evidence that the GEO Group, Inc., has failed to adequately address the health and mental issues facing detainees.

In addition to the issues of expansion, the protesters told the Daily Press that merely trying to visit detainees is a major struggle in itself.

Robert Del Toro of Hesperia said that both he and his wife have been denied visits on several occasions.

"They mess with you to keep the power," Del Toro said of the guards. "It seems like they're trying to keep us from visiting at all."

Mena said this past week the facility has had a sign inside stating that some men are quarantined with a case of shingles, and several of the visitors have been told that the person they're there to see is sick, only after waiting in the facility for two hours or more.

"The visiting hours aren't ever clear," Mena said.

Mena also made a point that GEO is "stealing jobs" and that the facility's expansion "is not the answer" to the city of Adelanto's bankruptcy.

The protesters' ultimate goal is to defund the detention facility altogether, and organizations and supporters throughout California have joined the effort to oppose the expansion.

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Darleen Jiggins, center, along with Juanita Martinez, right, and Jo White, hold signs in protest of The GEO Group Inc. a for-profit company that owns the Adelanto Detention Facility. These immigration detainee advocates oppose the addition of women and possibly the transfer of transgender detainees to the facility, which already houses adult male detainees sentenced by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement. (Jose Huerta, Daily Press)

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