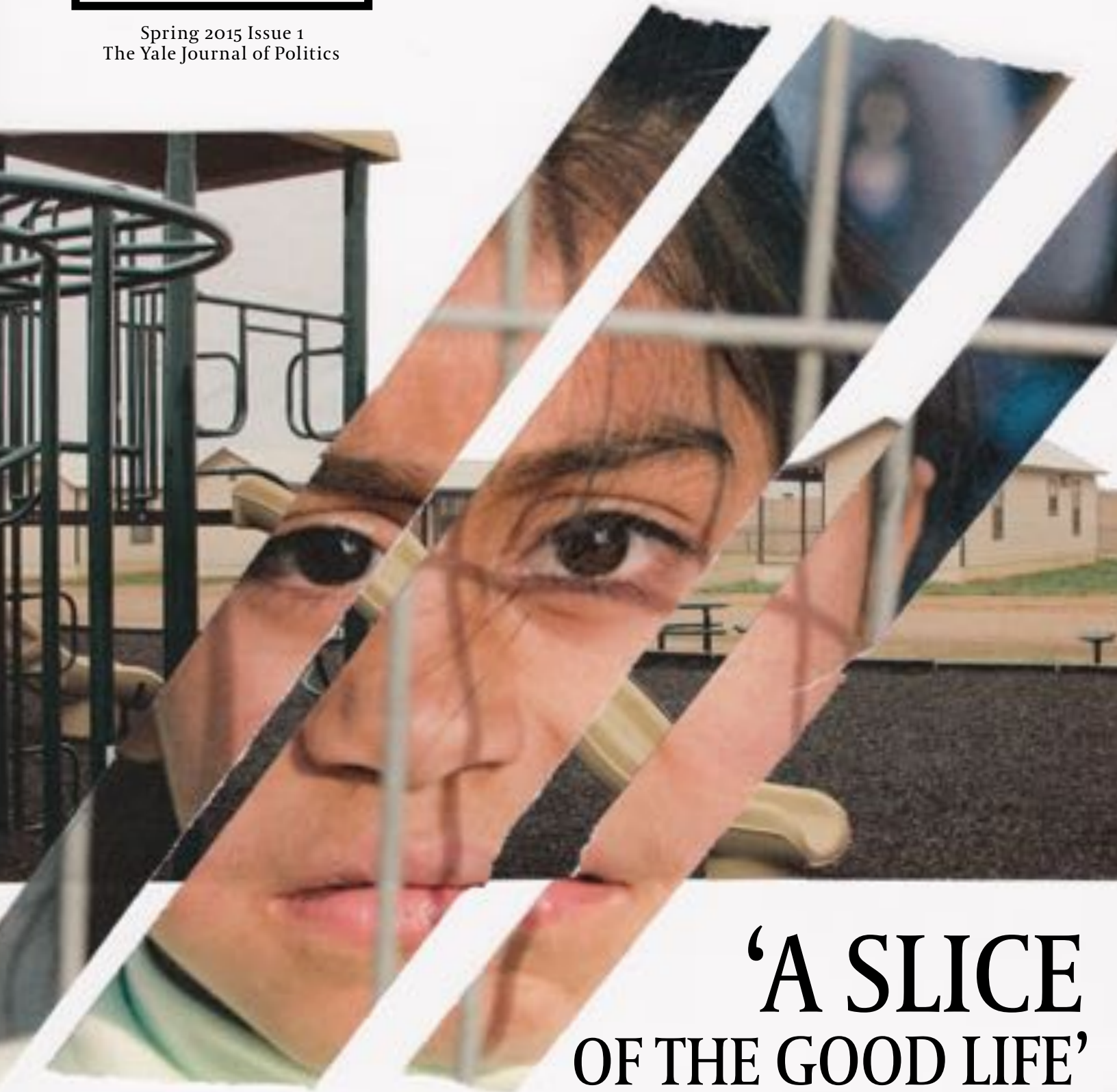


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‘A SLICE OF THE GOOD LIFE’

The Dilley detention center promises Central American asylum-seekers humanitarian housing—but some may be receiving more abuse.

Cover story



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By Anthony Kayruz

Gerardo Gonzalez, a 70-year-old lifelong resident of Dilley, Texas, did not recognize them. The two middle-aged white men dressed in button-ups and slacks stood out ostentatiously among the Mexican watermelon pickers and oilfield workers taking their lunch break in Taqueria Jalisco, one of the few restaurants that offers sit-down dining in the small, 3,000-person town of Dilley. Even the way the two men said taco attracted attention. “It’s not taw-co; it’s thah-co,” Gonzalez thought as he paused from eating his enchiladas verdes to examine the men. They clearly were not locals. Only 85 miles from the South Texas border, Dilley is almost entirely Mexican. Gringos—those with white skin—are conspicuous. Occasionally, white deer hunters pass through, or tourists come to take pictures of Dilley’s haunted Feed and Grain Mill, “Watermelon Capital of Texas” monument, and “Slice of the Good Life” welcome sign, but the two men didn’t wear the faded green attire of hunters nor bear the oblivious smiles of tourists. One of them held a briefcase; they were here on business. The two men, Tommy Alsop, an employee from the private prison company Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), and a representative from Target Logistics, a company that specializes in workforce housing, arrived in Dilley on August 25, 2014, to alert the city council that the 51.5 acre tract outside the town previously used to house oilfield workers would be converted into the South Texas Residential Center, the largest immigrant detention facility in the United States.

The meeting between the two men and the Dilley City Council was merely a formality. CCA and Target Logistics had already received the go-ahead from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to begin construction on the detention center. “It was out of our hands because it was a private business leasing out a private piece of land,” Noel Perez, the city administrator of Dilley, recounted. “Even though it’s within our city limit, we

don't have jurisdiction." After showing the city council blueprints of the 2,400 bed facility and verifying that Dilley had appropriate water and electrical utilities for the detention center, the two men left town. But their exit did not stem the tide of foreign CCA and Target Logistics workers that would soon arrive. Gerardo, who used to describe Dilley as *el pueblo tranquilo* or "the tranquil town" now referred to it as a place where "thousands of people come." From September to December 2014, more and more people appeared in Dilley. Most were "from the West Coast," according to a young lady who runs the only fitness center in Dilley and has sold many new gym memberships to CCA employees.

Among the new faces was Jeh Johnson, Secretary of Homeland Security, who visited Dilley on December 15, 2014, to officially open the South Texas Residential Center. Standing behind a podium along one of the arid, red dirt roads that line the detention compound, Johnson, in a press conference, announced that the 51.5-acre facility would house women and children who crossed the border illegally.

The Dilley facility is the fourth of its kind. While 250 other immigrant detention centers holding 33,400 undocumented persons dot the United States (U.S.), the Dilley complex is what ICE calls a "family detention space." The

name, however, is a misnomer. ICE defines a family as only a mother and her children. Fathers are separated from their wives, sons, and daughters and detained at standard immigration detention centers with other individual undocumented adults.

A man whom *The Politic* will call Luis* was separated from his wife and three sons after attempting to cross the border to flee gang violence perpetrated by the Zetas cartel in Sabinas, Mexico. "It's hell over there," Luis told me. "People get decapitated for no reason." Luis was held in an immigrant detention center in Laredo, TX, away from his family. Every week, he would run to the mail pickup to read a letter from his wife and kids. Even though he was locked up 23 hours a day, his wife's handwritten scrawl still made him smile. One day, a detention officer demanded Luis give him his wife's letter. After refusing multiple times, the officer forced Luis downstairs and beat him. He hit Luis with a baton twenty times while instructing him, "You do what we say. You don't belong to nobody. You belong to us." A week after the incident, Luis was deported back to Mexico, back to the violence of Sabinas, without his family.

Distraught over his separation from his wife and child, Luis paid a coyote, a person who helps undocumented migrants cross the American-Mexican

border, \$2500 and made the trek to the Rio Grande, the dangerous waterway that separates Texas from Northern Mexico, again. When he neared the river, members of the Zetas cartel spotted him. "They told me I had to carry drugs across the border or die," Luis recounted. Using the night to his advantage, Luis slipped away, sprinted towards the Rio Grande river, and plunged into the water. He let the water submerge him and allowed the current to carry him away from danger. "The night is the best time, but I was still running for my life," Luis said, grinning, proud of his escape. A month later, he reunited with his family in San Antonio, a year after their initial separation. Luis solemnly informed *The Politic* that other fathers aren't as lucky as him.

Division of families causes emotional turmoil, but the U.S. government sees family detention as a necessity. Before the summer of 2014, family detention was not a priority. At the time, only one family detention center existed: Berks County Family Shelter, an 85-bed facility in the small town of Leepport, PA. Since June 2014, however, ICE adopted an aggressive stance of rapid family detention and deportation. The timing of the policy shift is not coincidental. From October 2013 to September 2014, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) apprehended 68,445 family units (a mother and her children),

a 461 percent increase from the previous fiscal year. An influx of Central American migrants caused the spike in detentions. Of the 68,445 family units that entered the U.S., 61,334 were from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, collectively known as the Northern Triangle.

Gang violence—similar to what Luis experienced in Mexico—often drives Central Americans from the tropics to the barren desert of South Texas. Maritza, a sixteen-year-old who currently resides in the U.S. with her mother and two sisters, fled with her family from El Salvador to the U.S. after members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang took an interest in her. "In El Salvador, they take young girls, rape them and then throw them in plastic bags," Gabriela explained to the United Nations (U.N.) Refugee Agency. "My uncle told me it wasn't safe for me to stay there." According to the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador rank one, four, and five respectively for countries with the highest homicide rates. Honduras tops the list with 90.4 killings per 100,000 people. The massive migration of family units from the Northern Triangle to the U.S. this past summer has overwhelmed President Barack Obama's administration. In an attempt to expedite the legal proceedings of family units to determine asylum status, Obama has based his immigration policy on detaining adults with their children, according to a White House press release. By keeping family units centralized in detention facilities, the government can "enable the prompt removal of individuals who do not qualify for asylum."

Although Obama's rhetoric has focused on efficiency, Johnson barged into Dilley with a different message. To him, the South Texas Residential Center carries this refrain to immigrants: you are not welcome here. Johnson sees the facility primarily as a deterrent to potential immigrants. "All those who came here illegally after January 1, 2014—in other words, beginning of this year—are now priorities for removal to their home countries," Johnson announced in a press conference after the opening of the immigrant detention center in Dilley. He added, "It will now be more likely that you will be apprehended. It will now be more likely that you will be detained and sent back." He did not mention the U.S. as a possible home for families attempting to escape persecution in the Northern Triangle.

Cristina Parker, the Immigration Projects Director of Grassroots Leadership, a non-profit that monitors private prisons and the detention of immigrants, concluded that "the government is targeting fleeing women and children migrants specifically. I don't know why, but they are."

Nina Pruneda, the ICE agent overseeing the Dilley detention center,

refused to comment on the purpose of the new center. "The only person authorized to talk about the matter is the Secretary of Homeland Security," she told *The Politic*. Her superior, Vincent Picard, confirmed that ICE was not allowed to comment. All press would go through Johnson.

The South Texas Residential Center officially opened on December 15, 2014, when Johnson left Dilley. It received its first families on December 19, 2014.

Where is Eloy, Arizona?

Harvey Krauss, the city manager of Eloy, Arizona knew that his city had struck a great deal. Pressured to scrap the insufficient 700-bed, federally-run immigrant detention facility in Artesia, NM, for the larger detention complex in Dilley, the Department of Homeland Security looked to the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) to build a new center. To avoid the bureaucratic red tape of constructing a detention complex from scratch, ICE and CCA added Dilley's South Texas Residential Center to Eloy's preexisting contract for the Eloy Detention Facility. Eloy will receive \$436,000 a year for the contract expansion.

Besides the fact that Eloy is far-removed from Dilley (931 miles and two states away), the strongest opposition against Eloy's role comes from the troubling track record of the CCA-led Eloy Detention Center. Of all the detention centers and prisons that ICE oversees (private and federal), the Eloy Detention Center has the highest death rate. Thirteen immigrants have died in the Eloy facility since October 2003. Krauss shrugged off the statistic with the answer: "People die all the time." Yet, the causes of death are alarming.

On October 8, 2008, Emmanuel Owusu, a 62-year old Ghanaian arrested for shoplifting, hanged himself after spending less than two years in Eloy's detention center. Two others—a 32-year-old from Guatemala and a 29-year-old from Mexico—also hanged themselves. One died from diabetes at age 34, while another passed away from congestive heart failure at age 54. "What we are seeing here are people who could have survived if offered proper psychiatric and medical care," remarked Dr. Sandra Vasquez, Director of the St. Mary's Health Science Center in San Antonio, TX, after reviewing the cases of those who died in the Eloy Detention Center. "If they are really getting screened and taken care of, those deaths shouldn't happen."

Krauss, after learning the specifics of Eloy Detention Center deaths, still puts his trust in the Corrections Corporation of America and believes it is a "professional organization and will deal accordingly with issues they have." A CCA representative from the Eloy facility also confirmed that the center has improved its

medical and psychiatric services, has not had a death in 2014, and receives weekly inspections from ICE officers.

Bob Libal, the executive director of Grassroots Leadership that fights to end for-profit incarceration, is skeptical of CCA's assurances. "ICE has oversight control of CCA, but it fails. ICE is so dependent on private corporations like the CCA that it completely defers decisions to them." He recounted an open meeting that ICE and a private prison company conducted to unveil a new private prison in Austin, TX. After introducing themselves, the ICE representatives immediately referred to the CCA directors as the "real experts" who would explain the ins and outs of good prison practice. "The CCA is really in control of its own actions," Libal said. "Any oversight is minimal. With shareholders in mind and a bad track record, do we really want the Correction Corporation of America at the helm of our immigration policy?"

Don't Call It a Prison

The two rows of palm trees that line the entrance of the new 2400-bed detention center in Dilley look out of place among the scorched grass and barren dirt roads of South Texas. They evoke thoughts of West Coast sunshine, not piercing, desert heat. Two "South Texas Residential Center" banners hang against a fashionable limestone wall infused with stucco, one next to each set of palm trees. Judging by the name and entrance, a passerby might think that the complex is a wealthy collection of apartments. Only the barbed wire fence around the center's perimeter signals otherwise.

Inside the South Texas Residential Center, two soccer fields and three playgrounds are nestled among the modular houses and dirt roads. Inside each home is a flatscreen television and two red couches. Common areas have Xboxes, and the learning centers have computers with a rotating *Bienvenidos!*—"Welcome!" in Spanish—as the screensaver. Residents will be offered three meals a day. The amenities within Dilley's detention center do not sound like the features of a prison or the work of a private-prison company. Noel Perez, Dilley's city administrator, said the new center is a "humanitarian move from Immigration and Customs Enforcement to provide decent housing for migrant women and children as they go through the immigration process. They will have better housing and eat better than they did in their home countries."

Two CCA corrections officers, one male, the other female, agreed to speak with me anonymously about their first week at the Dilley detention center. They cited CCA and ICE policy as their reason for anonymity. "We can't even give you our names or tell you where we're from,"





one of them explained. “It’s for our own protection,” the other added.

The male CCA officer, who worked in two other prisons, one federal and one private, described the South Texas Residential Center as a “whole different ball game.” He repeatedly emphasized the residential aspect of the detention center. He remembered the first children running into their temporary homes and smiling as they turned on TVs and jumped on the sofas. “These families are living well” was the refrain that the officer muttered under his breath throughout our conversation.

The female CCA employee explained how at the South Texas Residential Center, corrections officers are called “resident advisors,” RAs, and wardens are called “administrators.” The naming system is reminiscent of a college, where the RA’s job is not just to ensure the safety of their students but also to make sure they have fun. The CCA employees feel the same way.

One six-year-old child from Guatemala ran around the facility playground, pretending to shoot webs out of his wrists. “I’m Spiderman!” he yelled while climbing the dark green monkey bars as if they were part of his fantastical construction of webs. Exhausted, the boy ran inside and saw another child playing with a superhero action figure. He sat against the couch and pouted, “I wish I had a Spiderman toy.” Three minutes later, the female CCA “resident adviser” tapped the boy on the back and said, “Here you go,” as she placed a new Spiderman action figure into his hand. “It looks like a Toys ‘R’ Us inside. You feel like you’re not even at work; you feel like you’re with your grandkids,” she explained.

“It’s not a prison whatsoever. The families love it compared to where they’ve been. They are blessed that they are here,” the male CCA employee concluded.

Nevertheless, the Dilley population, 35.8 percent of whom lives below the poverty line, are divided over the conditions at the detention facility. Some, like Father Antonio Villanueva, who leads

St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Dilley, are glad that the migrants are being treated humanely. “I am in favor of the facility because it emphasizes the humanity of the women and children,” he proclaimed. For the first time in their lives, they seemingly get to experience Dilley’s motto: a slice of the good life.

Others, burdened by taxes and struggling to make a living, resent the amenities of the South Texas Residential Center. Petra Torres, a small 62-year-old woman who has lived in Dilley her entire life, operates a gaming arcade in the center of town. She has swept the concrete floors and cleaned the slot machines since she was twelve. Petra knows Dilley as well as she knows her arcade; she has seen it grow from a hundred-person outpost to a small town along a major highway. She believes development, whether it be the building of a Dollar General or the construction of a new road, always leads to more taxes and price hikes. Petra held out her mop and sullied cloth to me and confessed, “I have worked the same job for fifty years. I can’t quit because I need the money to get by, and meanwhile my dollars are paying for migrants to live in luxury five minutes from my house.”

Petra is right that housing undocumented family units in a detention center is not cheap. It costs the federal government \$266 per day for each detained migrant in the South Texas Residential Center. To put this amount in perspective: it costs \$254 to stay at the Hyatt Hill Country Resort and Spa, a four star hotel in San Antonio that boasts a lazy river and a beach area. Assuming the detention center is filled to its 2400-bed capacity throughout the entire year, the government will pay approximately \$233 million for the South Texas Residential Center in 2015. It is no surprise that the Secretary of Homeland Security requested supplemental funding from Congress.

The gym teacher at Dilley High School, who also runs the local fitness center, observed that the high school

doesn’t even have “two soccer fields, three playgrounds, or three good meals a day.” She said it is “absurd” that the U.S. pays for migrants to live well while Dilley has its own homeless women and children.

Petra and Dilley’s gym instructor, united in their opposition to the new detention center, still acknowledge that it will provide 600 more jobs for people in Dilley. The jobs will pay \$24 an hour, about three times more than minimum wage. Albert DeLeon, Dilley’s Chief of Police, admitted with a hearty laugh, “Lots of people wished they worked there, or even better—lived there.”

Too Good To Be True

Alta García tries to quiet her 10-year-old daughter Ana, who lies on the floor in a sobbing fit. Her younger brother Victor stays quietly curled in the corner. He hasn’t said much since they arrived at the “residential center.” Martín, Alta’s two-year-old son, has grown accustomed to throwing tantrums and hitting other kids. Alta’s children were not always this way. Ana was well behaved back in El Salvador. Victor, now sulking in the corner, was sociable, and Martín was calm. Their mannerisms changed after a month of being in Karnes County Residential Center, an immigrant detention facility for families in Southern Texas.

Lynette Arnold, a close friend of Alta, visited her in September 2014 and wrote about her experience for CIVIC (Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrant in Confinement), a nonprofit dedicated to ending immigration detention. She walked through the playfully blue- and red-colored entrance and past the soccer field and play area to reach the visitation room. After speaking with an “RA,” Lynette saw Alta and her children, who ran to embrace her. The RA broke up the hugging and instructed each person to sit in a separate seat. Lynette took a close look at her friend and her children. “They all lost a lot of weight,”

Lynette recounted. “They looked hungry and desperate for comfort.”

Grassroots Leadership’s Bob Libal confirmed that weight loss is not unique to Alta’s family. Libal told me, “I went to Karnes, and I spoke to many women, all of whom said their children were losing weight due to poor nutrition and stress. Moreover, many have been threatened with separation of their kids as a disciplinary mechanism.”

Karnes County Residential Center, where Alta and her children stayed, was built in 2012 as a model for humanitarian immigrant detention. The GEO Group, the private prison company in charge of Karnes, emphasized that the prison staff are “RAs” and that the warden is an “administrator”—just like in Dilley. Converted from a standard immigrant detention center to a family immigrant detention center for Central American women and children in July 2014, the 532-bed facility is full of amenities such as televisions in each room, play rooms with toys, a soccer field, basketball and volleyball courts, and computers with internet access. Sound familiar? It should. Karnes County Residential Center was marketed the same way that Dilley’s South Texas Residential Center is now. San Antonio Congressman Lamar Smith (R-TX) scoffed at Karnes and ICE for going “beyond common sense to accommodate illegal immigrants... and treating them better than citizens.” His remarks read like the criticisms of some Dilley residents today.

However, recent allegations and lawsuits against the Karnes County Residential Center prove that it is not the luxurious place critics imagine. In September 2014—less than two months after the facility began housing immigrant families—the Mexican Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), an organization that seeks to protect the rights of Latinos in the U.S., and the University of Texas Immigration Law Clinic filed two formal complaints to

the Department of Homeland Security regarding human rights abuses within the Karnes Center.

The first alleged that the Karnes facility staff did not offer educational programs to children under the age of four, restricted infants from crawling in non-private quarters, threatened to report disciplinary issues to the immigration judge hearing the families’ asylum case, and failed to have a doctor on site to handle complex medical issues such as persistent coughs and depression.

The second allegation accused male residential advisers of sexual abuse and exploitation. Marisa Bono, the Staff Attorney spearheading MALDEF’s complaints, revealed that three or four Karnes employees are suspected of harassing female detainees. A male RA repeatedly called one female detainee “novia” (“girlfriend” in Spanish) as he groped her and tried to kiss her in front of her children. Another detainee was offered assistance with her family’s immigration case in return for sexual favors. MALDEF’s complaint lamented, “The detainees at Karnes Center are predominantly women and children who have fled horrific violence and conditions in their home countries, including sexual violence and extortion. It is deeply disturbing that their experience in the custody of the U.S. government is subjecting them to further exploitation.”

MALDEF further alleged that the environment at Karnes facilitates such abuse. Guards are predominantly male, and they have unrestricted access to residential dorms and the women and children at any time. ICE spokesperson Nina Pruneda commented that the government has a “zero-tolerance policy” with regards to sexual abuse, but refused to cite specific measures taken by Karnes to address the concerns raised by MALDEF. Bono, the MALDEF attorney, worries that the residential advisers who committed sexual harassment still work at Karnes.

A CCA officer who works at the detention center in Dilley assured *The Politic* that people should not worry about misconduct within the South Texas Residential Center. He said the RAs “look out for one another” and are not afraid to call out a fellow employee who acts against ICE policy.

But Cristina Parker, an anti-immigrant detention advocate who works for Grassroots Leadership, vehemently disagreed with such assurances: “You have to ask yourself: what have the CCA and other private prisons done before? They have a clear, verifiable track record of abuse and mistreatment of detainees. From Eloy to Karnes to every other immigrant detention center, the government and private prison companies have failed to protect the people entrusted to them. We can’t assume Dilley will be any different.”

Moving Forward

The South Texas Residential Center is the result of conflicting approaches. It attempts to be both threatening and humanitarian. One half tells potential migrants, “Stay away or you’ll be detained and sent back quickly,” and the other says, “But if you do come, you will stay in a place with lots of amenities.” Luis, the father who fled to Texas to escape Mexican cartel violence and reunite with his family, said detention centers would not deter him or anyone else he knew who wanted to come to the U.S. “They are already going to risk everything and take their chances. They’re crazy like that—crazy for safety, freedom, and opportunity. If they have a chance to come, they’ll take it no matter what,” he said. The U.N. Refugee Agency confirmed Luis’s presumption when it reported, “There is no empirical evidence that the threat of being detained deters irregular migration or discourages people from seeking asylum” in a June 2014 press release.

Moreover, “humanitarian detention”—the other aspect of the South Texas Residential Center—is a contradiction no matter how anyone dresses it up. “Detention is of itself a violation of people’s liberty,” explained Libal. The Convention of the Rights of the Child and the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights—two international guidelines for conducting humanitarian policy—also denounce detention for restricting people’s liberty. The reality that the U.S. detains asylum-seekers and subjects them to mistreatment within its facilities gives the U.S. a lamentable human rights résumé.

ICE thinks the Dilley detention center is necessary to ensure timely removals of migrants by making sure they attend their court proceedings, but Alternatives to Detention (ATDs), including GPS-monitored ankle bracelets and weekly in-person reporting programs, have also proven effective: in 2010, Congress sponsored a supervision-reporting program that required undocumented asylum-seekers to check in once every week, and 93.8 percent of them attended their court hearings. The program only cost \$12 per person per day, substantially less than the cost of detaining families.

“Just don’t lock them up. It’s not right to lock up wife and kids,” Luis said. “While alternatives may have problems of their own, at least you can move. At least you can go outside. At least it’s not a prison.”

**Name changed to protect privacy.*