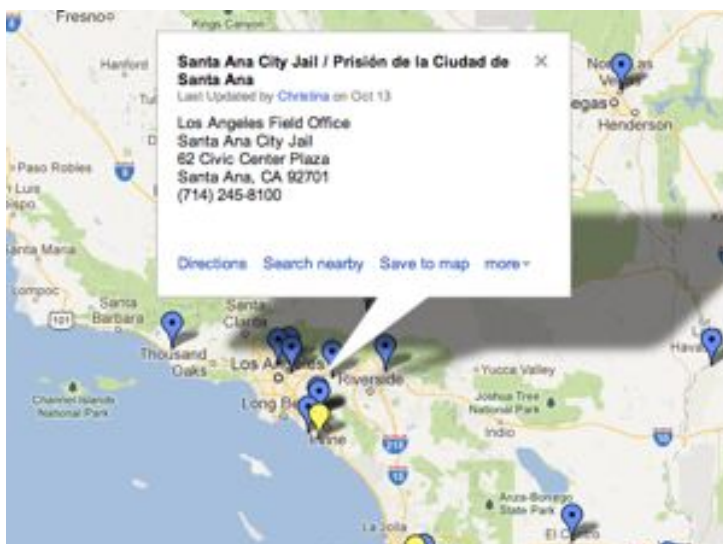


Thoughts from a CIVIC Visitor Volunteer

Karen Vance

The little I used to know of the plight of people in immigration detention came from Quaker discussions of prison reform, in general. But as the mother of a transgender son, when I learned I might visit transgender immigrants in detention as part of a visitation program to a segregated LGBT unit in Santa Ana, California, I knew it was time for me to become personally involved.



I entered the detention facility for a pre-visitation tour organized by CIVIC not knowing what to expect. It is a jail that houses both “ICE detainees” and pre-trial inmates. The building is a modern part of a civic center complex. I climbed an impressive flight of exterior stairs to enter the front door. The three male ICE agents who came to greet us in the waiting area, as well as the female in charge of

the “non-sworn” (read non-union) guards were all, I believe, Latino. Non-union is important; although ICE has an intergovernmental service agreement with the City of Santa Ana to house immigrants in detention at the city jail, we were told multiple times during the tour that it is a “revenue generating” facility. Despite the profit made by the detention of immigrants, these guards probably have neither the salary nor benefits of sworn officers in California.

The building was full of long empty corridors, much like a hospital. Missing was the friendly and encouraging smile of passersby. The pods, from the interior, appeared to wing off this warren of corridors. When I first walked into the fourth floor LGBT pod, I was nervous but felt some warmth. While everyone, male and female, was dressed in orange and many sat as though waiting at a bus station, others talked. There were men and women playing basketball outside on a concrete patio. This was certainly no place for anyone to be, but I

sensed nothing obviously draconian. As it turns out, my perception was truly off.

Before we were to visit with groups of these individuals as part of our tour, the ICE agents allowed time for questions. This is when the true nature of this so called LGBT pod began to emerge. We were first told that there were no Lesbians on this unit. Since Trans women can certainly be Lesbians, I understood this to mean that no cisgender (people who remain in the gender they were assigned at birth) women are on this unit. ICE clearly lacked sophistication in notions of sexual identity for Trans women. Alright – but things got steadily worse.

I asked about the Trans women who had fully transitioned surgically. We were told that none existed within the entire system of immigration detention, or at least none had come through the Santa Ana City Jail. Alright – can't be true but if dark suited ICE agents with coiled communication devices in their ears want to tell me this, in their jail, I will not challenge them. Next, I was told that there are absolutely no female-to-male Transgender people in the entire immigration detention system. I am shocked and taken aback, but voice no concern. They are denying the existence of all men like my son, who are most certainly somewhere in the system.

Any hint of warmth has left my body. I am feeling rather cold. What ICE has decided to tout as “LGBT detainee detention” is simply and clearly the prison systems’ standard version of gender segregation: everyone who still has a penis is to be housed together. As it has always been. Yes, Trans women and Gay men feel marginally safer. But this is not reform.

We walk into a glassed conference room in full view of the pod. I can't help but wonder if these ICE agents listen to us as well as watch us. Three separate groups of eight people each come through and talk for twenty minutes. Food is bad, medical services almost unobtainable. To my relief, hormones are available though there can be a lag of up to five months before receipt. Asylum seekers are here, mixed with others, and receive no counseling. And to my deep, wrenching and pervasive regret, Trans women are told by some guards to use their male names and masculine pronouns. For Gay men or Trans women to express any femininity, to use other than their “big boy” voices, is to risk possible lockdown. This is draconian. This denies the core of the Trans women's very being. This is gratuitous cruelty.

All pretenses remaining, if there were any remaining, that this is an LGBT pod, are gone. I come later, to visit an asylum seeker and I will return to visit her. I shake as I remember and write this. If the topic of Transgender Detainees is new to you, it would be hard to overstate their horrifying experiences with the penal system: through sexual assault, solitary confinement, bullying from guards, lockdown and all other sources.

Our challenge, in the Santa Ana City Jail, now, is to reeducate/train the LGBT pod guards in gender identity and expression. They are said to have received training, but the training was either poor or minimal, at best. This might mean the cruelty they inflict on these men and women in immigration detention is deliberate, or at least, ignorant. Perhaps they believe it is for their own good. I am not sure how to close this entry, except to say that our work is wide open. As a Quaker and a mother, I try to experience and to bring light. I reach out to you to support and to be supported.