

# Critics push for immigrant detention in Taylor to close

## Enforceable standards, mandated by a federal court, are set to expire Aug. 29.

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Critics of a controversial immigrant detention center in Taylor are stepping up efforts to shut it down as a court mandate for improved conditions at the facility is set to expire.

A 2007 settlement agreement ordered enforceable standards, including external oversight and improved education, nutrition and medical care at the T. Don Hutto Residential Center, a former medium-security state prison.

But that agreement is scheduled to expire on Aug. 29, and questions linger on whether the new standards will continue. Opponents of the 512-bed facility, including the American Civil Liberties Union, have lobbied members of Congress and held protests urging that the facility be shuttered.

This week, several people spoke against the facility at the Williamson County Commissioners Court meeting.

"I do not believe that we should be placing the burden of our unresolved issues on children and families while they are waiting for an administrative resolution of their immigrant status," said Allene Booth-Judson, a retired director of special programs, including bilingual education and at-risk programming, at Round Rock Independent School District. "Our country has many unresolved issues dealing with immigration"

The for-profit facility is operated by Corrections Corp. of America through a contract with Williamson County. The county receives about \$15,800 a month from the company.

The Commissioners Court has sent a request to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Corrections Corp. of America that they provide written documentation that the standards will be upheld, said Williamson County Judge Dan Gattis. "My beliefs are that the stipulations sent down by the court should be followed," Gattis said. "The county has little role in this because it's a federal deal."

Correction Corp. of America spokesman Steve Owen referred questions about future standards at the facility to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which oversees the center, declined to comment on the matter.

The center, opened in 2006, holds families awaiting adjudication in immigration cases and has been criticized even after the settlement for what some have said are substandard living conditions for those held at the facility.

Detainees hail from all over the world and are seeking asylum or are being held on noncriminal violations of immigration law.

Two years ago, the University of Texas School of Law's Immigration Clinic and the ACLU of Texas won a settlement in a federal suit that accused the government of violating the rights of minors held at the center.

"The conditions at Hutto when we first began to work there in September 2006 and throughout our litigation were deplorable and are an example of what happens without external oversight," said Barbara Hines, director of UT Law's Immigration Clinic. "No modifications to Hutto would have been made without community advocacy and litigation."

The settlement mandated that each family be able to spend an unlimited time together in their rooms, with the door open between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., according to the agreement. It also eliminated scheduled head counts of residents, instead allowing residents to check in with staff members three times a day, and ordered that children at the center be given five hours of schooling per day and that adult education classes be provided. It also mandated that the government provide Spanish-speaking medical staff and a limited number of over-the-counter medications.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement also agreed to allow a federal magistrate to conduct periodic on-site reviews of the facility. Those on-site reviews will end with the expiration of the settlement.

"I cannot imagine that they will literally roll back the clock and go back to treatment that I think has been roundly condemned as egregious," Lisa Graybill, legal director for the ACLU of Texas, said at a recent news conference. "That said, it is really worrisome to us that there will be no external oversight."

Graybill acknowledged improvements to the facility, but still is pushing to shut it down.

"Some cosmetic improvements, which are significant, don't change the fact that it's a jail," Graybill said.

Late last year, Williamson County Commissioners extended a contract with Corrections Corp. of America for two years. The county has had a contract with the company and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement since 2006 to act as the intermediary between the two and disburse federal funds for the facility.

Graybill said the county could possibly shut down the facility if it decides to no longer take part in the agreement.

"Whether the government could operate the Hutto detention center absent Williamson County is a harder question," she said.

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