

# Report: Government plans to stop sending families to Taylor detention center

## T. Don Hutto would be converted to facility for immigrant women, Obama Administration official says.

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The Obama administration plans to announce today that the government will stop sending families to the T. Don Hutto Residential Center in Taylor — where families are held while they await adjudication of their immigration cases — as part of an overhaul of the nation's immigration detention system, The New York Times reported.

Details of the overall plan are sketchy, and even the first steps will take months or years to complete, the newspaper reported.

The plan includes reviewing the federal government's contracts with more than 350 local jails and private prisons, with an eye toward consolidating many detainees in places more suitable for noncriminals facing deportation — some possibly in centers built and run by the government.

But the government would take immediate action on Hutto, a 512-bed center run for profit by the Corrections Corp. of America under a \$2.8-million-a-month federal contract.

The facility was a centerpiece of the Bush administration's approach to immigration enforcement when it opened in 2006. The decision to stop sending families there — and to set aside plans for three more family detention centers — is the Obama administration's clearest departure from its predecessor's immigration enforcement policies, the newspaper said.

Dan Kowalski, an Austin immigration attorney who represents a woman formerly housed at the Hutto facility in Taylor, welcomed the announcement.

"I'm happy to hear it. My only question is, 'What are they going to do with the people that they would have sent to Hutto?' " he said.

John Morton, who heads the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency as assistant secretary of homeland security, told The New York Times on Wednesday that Hutto will be converted into an immigration jail for women. He said that he hasn't ruled out the possibility of detaining families but that the Berks Family Shelter Care Facility, an 84-bed former nursing home in Leesport, Pa., is a better facility for those detainees.

Reached by phone Wednesday evening, Williamson County Judge Dan A. Gattis' first reaction was, "Good. My quote is: Good."

The facility has drawn unwanted attention to Williamson County. Opponents including the American Civil Liberties Union have lobbied Congress and held protests urging that the facility be closed, and citizens have spoken against it before county commissioners.

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 2007 settlement agreement ordered enforceable standards at the center, including requirements that families be able to spend an unlimited time together in their rooms with the door open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., eliminating scheduled head counts and ordered five hours of schooling per day for children, among other things. That agreement was scheduled to expire Aug. 29.

"We're happy that the administration is taking a look at its policies on family detention," said Jose Medina, a spokesman for the ACLU of Texas. "We're eagerly waiting to see what the details are. But this is clearly a positive development."

Gattis said the administration's move would take the pressure off the county, which he described as acting as a middle man between the federal government and Corrections Corp. of America. Williamson County receives about \$15,800 a month under its latest 2-year contract with the company, which commissioners voted to renew in December.

"I've always said, whatever (the federal government's) policy is, we're here to help," he said. "It's really their policy, not ours."

The new policy, according to The New York Times, aims to establish more centralized authority over the detention system, which holds about 400,000 immigration detainees over the course of a year, and more direct oversight of detention centers.

The number detained at Hutto has dropped sharply, to 127 individuals from as many as 450, the newspaper said.

Additional material from staff writers Miguel Liscano and Andrea Lorenz

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