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Facing Trial, Government Agrees to Improve Conditions at Immigrant Center

By [CLIFFORD KRAUSS](#)

HOUSTON, Aug. 27 — The federal government and lawyers for immigrant children have announced an agreement to improve living conditions at the nation's main family detention center for illegal immigrant suspects.

The deal involves the 512-bed T. Don Hutto Residential Center in Taylor, Tex., which houses about 400 asylum seekers and others suspected of being in the country illegally, about half of whom are children and teenagers.

When it opened last year, the privately run center was to be a model for a tougher federal [immigration](#) policy in which more people suspected of being illegal immigrants would be held instead of released before hearings. But the center drew protests when it was reported that immigrant children were inadequately fed, deprived of toys and confined to cells with open toilets.

The [American Civil Liberties Union](#) and the immigration clinic at the [University of Texas](#) Law School sued federal officials on behalf of 26 immigrant children and teenagers, seeking their release and improved conditions at the center.

The agreement, announced as a trial had been set to begin on Monday, requires improving education, recreation and nutrition for children, hiring a full-time pediatrician, and installing privacy curtains around toilets. It provides for inspections by a federal magistrate, Andrew W. Austin.

"This is a huge victory," said Vanita Gupta, a lawyer with the Racial Justice Program of the A.C.L.U. "Though we continue to believe that Hutto is an inappropriate place to house children, conditions have drastically improved in areas like education, recreation, medical care and privacy."

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency heralded the settlement and defended the center as safe.

The agency said in a statement that it "continues to improve Hutto, ensuring that the facility's residents are detained in an environment appropriate for both parents and children." It added that "residents are treated with dignity and respect."

The agreement requires the approval of Judge Sam Sparks of Federal District Court in Austin.

Even critics have said conditions at the center have improved markedly since the lawsuit was filed in March, citing expanded outdoor recreation time and educational opportunities and the elimination of a requirement that children wear institutional uniforms.

All 26 youths involved in the suit have been released in the last several months, including six in the last few days. The six are living with family members who are American citizens or permanent legal residents.

According to a statement by the A.C.L.U., the six children responded to their release with emotion. One of them, Andrea Restrepo, a 12-year-old from Colombia, was quoted as saying: "I am trying to forget everything about Hutto. I feel free. It was a nightmare."

Establishing the center was part of a plan to expand detention space as a way to house those rounded up in raids on workplaces and a crackdown along the borders.

It was to be part of a reversal of policy in which tens of thousands of arrested immigrants were released every year before immigration hearings, which many then did not attend. Most of the people held in the center came from Latin American countries where they could not be easily sent home. The center is intended to hold detainees for a matter of days, but some immigrants have been held for two months or more.

The immigration agency said it continued to believe in family detention as a main component to the federal "catch and remove" policy. "Keeping families together through the removal process," the agency said, "ensures that illegal alien children remain with parents, their best caregivers."

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