



National Latina/o Psychological Association

Asociación Nacional de Psicología Latina

October 7, 2016

The Honorable Jeh Johnson
Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Johnson:

The National Latina/o Psychological Association is an organization composed of mental health professionals and students committed to promoting awareness and understanding of issues pertaining to the health, mental health, and well-being of Latina/o communities. We want to express our serious concerns over the detention of Central American women and their children at Berks Family Residential Center (Berks) in Leesport, PA. Berks, a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility, is currently operating under an expired license. The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services failed to renew the facility's license in February 2016, yet they have been allowed to continue operations during the appeals process. We have evidence of the growing desperation from the mothers housed at Berks: 22 mothers launched a hunger strike on August 8, 2016. We also have indication of coercive practices used to control their behaviors: the hunger strike was temporarily halted on August 23rd due to reported threats from officials that mothers would be separated from their children.¹

The women and children housed at Berks are vulnerable. The majority originate from the area known as the Northern Triangle: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The Northern Triangle has been recognized for its extreme levels of poverty and violence. Over the past years, these countries have collectively accounted for the highest murder rates in the world.^{2,3} Many of these women and their children have been likely exposed to significant traumatic events. Ongoing confinement for an undetermined period of time will only serve to exacerbate their suffering and compromise their long-term emotional well-being. Narratives of escalating distress on the women and children at Berks is illustrated in a recent brief from Human Rights First following a July 2016 visit from a team of advocates, attorneys, and mental health professionals who met with the detained mothers.⁴

The detrimental effect of detention on children and families has been well-documented nationally and internationally.^{5,6,7} The American Immigration Lawyers Association, Women's Refugee Commission, and American Immigration Council detailed the trauma experienced by women and children and called for an investigation into the impact of detention on children and mothers.⁸ The American Academy of Pediatrics expressed concern about women and children detained in family residential centers in Texas and Pennsylvania, noting that "detention or incarceration itself is associated with poorer health outcomes, higher rates of psychological distress, and suicidality making the situation for already

vulnerable women and children even worse.”⁹ Internationally, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child clearly states that: “The detention of a child because of their or their parent’s migration status constitutes a child rights violation and always contravenes the principle of the best interests of the child. In this light, States should expeditiously and completely cease the detention of children on the basis of their immigration status.”¹⁰ Most recently, on September 30, 2016, the Department of Homeland Security Advisory Committee on Family Residential Centers – a committee your office established in June 2015 in response to a recognized need to “make substantial changes to our detention practices when it comes to families” – released a 159-page report recommending the termination of detention practices for children and families.¹¹

We join our colleagues and urge you to ensure the emotional well-being of the mothers and children who have sought refuge in the United States. The National Latina/o Psychological Association condemns the detention of immigrant women and children and begs you to consider the negative psychological impact of confinement on a young child’s developing identity and a mother’s ability to provide a positive and predictable environment. Given the compelling evidence of the damaging effects of detention on the health and mental health of detainees, we recommend the immediate closure of Berks, and the release of the mothers and children to their families and community-based alternatives to detention while they await their immigration proceedings. We believe there is a need for immediate action. Knowing the troubling conditions experienced by the families in immigration detention facilities requires a humanitarian response. It is negligent for individuals, organizations, or an entire nation, to witness injustice and remain silent.

The National Latina/o Psychological Association stands ready to be part of the solution. We are available to further discuss this issue with you or your staff and to collaborate on efforts to protect the psychological well-being of immigrant women and children. Please do not hesitate to contact me via email at: melanie.domenech@usu.edu.

Sincerely,



Melanie M. Domenech Rodríguez, Ph.D.
President, National Latina/o Psychological Association

References

¹Fernández, V. (2016, August 25). Moms go on a hunger strike to get themselves and their kids out of immigration detention. *Public Radio International*. Retrieved from <http://www.pri.org/stories/2016-08-25/madres-berks-are-hunger-strike-get-their-kids-out-immigration-detention>

²UNODC *Global Study on Homicide 2013* (United Nations publication, Sales No. 14.IV.1) Retrieved from United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime website: <https://www.unodc.org/gsh/en/index.html>

³Renwick, D. (2016, January 19). *Central America's Violent Northern Triangle*. Retrieved August 25, 2016, from <http://www.cfr.org/transnational-crime/central-americas-violent-northern-triangle/p37286>

⁴Human Rights First. (2016). *Long-term detention of mothers and children in Pennsylvania*. Retrieved from <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/HRF-Long-Term-Detention-Brief.pdf>

⁵Australian Human Rights Commission. (2014). *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention*. Sydney, Australia: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/asylum-seekers-and-refugees/publications/forgotten-children-national-inquiry-children>

⁶Brabeck, K.M., Lykes, M.B., & Hunter, C. (2014). The psychosocial impact of detention and deportation on U.S. migrant children and families. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *84*, 496-505.

⁷Physicians for Human Rights and Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture. (2003). *From persecution to prison: The health consequences of detention for asylum seekers*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/report-persprison.html>

⁸Letter to Megan Mack, Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Department of Homeland Security, RE: The Psychological Impact of Family Detention on Mothers and Children Seeking Asylum, signed by Karen Lucas, American Immigration Lawyers Association, Katharina Obser, Women's Refugee Commission, and Beth Werlin, American Immigration Council, June 30, 2015.

⁹Letter to the Honorable Jeh Johnson, Secretary, Department of Homeland Security, signed by Sandra G. Hassink, MD, FAAP, President of the American Academy of Pediatrics, July 24, 2015.

¹⁰Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2012). Recommendation 78, *Report of the 2012 Day of General Discussion, The Rights of All Children in the Context of International Migration*. Retrieved from:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/discussion2012/ReportDGDChildrenAndMigration2012.pdf>

¹¹Report of the DHS Advisory Committee on Family Residential Centers. (2016). Retrieved from:

<https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report/2016/ACFRC-sc-16093.pdf>