

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

INSIDE A TEXAS DETENTION FACILITY FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

The centers have become focal points in Trump's efforts to crack down on illegal immigration

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August 10, 2018

DILLEY, Texas – In the past 10 months, more than 25,000 immigrant mothers and their children caught illegally crossing into the U.S. at the border with Mexico have spent their first weeks in the country living in a sprawling compound of trailers, tents and playgrounds.

The children go to school most days and their parents meet with lawyers and immigration advocates who volunteer at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center. Almost everyone will ask for asylum in the U.S., a process that could take several years.

For most, the stay will last no more than 20 days, because of a federal court ruling that bars the government from detaining children with their parents for any longer.

The South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley and a second family detention center about 95 miles to the east in Karnes have become focal points in President Trump's continuing efforts to crack down on illegal immigration and quickly deport people caught crossing the border illegally. Both are operated by contractors and overseen by ICE.

The Trump administration wants the families' stay at the detention centers to end only when an immigration judge decides if they should be deported or allowed to stay and live in the U.S. But so far, neither the judge in California who ordered the 20-day limit nor Congress has acted to change the rules.

So families rotate in and out of the facility, which can hold as many as 2,400 mothers and children. Daniel Bible, an ICE official in charge of detaining and deporting unauthorized immigrants in this part of Texas, said since October only 122 people have been deported from the center. The others are released to relatives or on their own, many with an ankle monitor and a court date to appear for their asylum hearing after their stay here.

Since Mr. Trump signed an executive order ending the practice of separating families at the border and a federal judge in San Diego ordered the government to reunite thousands of parents and children in June, numerous mothers and their children have been sent to Dilley.

Mr. Bible said Thursday that about 10 percent of the roughly 1,500 immigrants being held there were immigrants who had been separated at the border and later reunited. The rest, he said, were sent to the detention center after being apprehended along the Mexican border. About 100 newly arrived immigrants are brought in daily.

ICE officials allowed a group of reporters into the detention facility Thursday and provided a guided tour. At one of the indoor gyms, the door was propped open by a speaker blasting a

Jimmy Buffett song. The classrooms were outfitted like most typical schools, with science projects on display for the older children and the alphabet on a wall for the youngest.

Michael Sheridan, an ICE manager and program analyst at the center, said any child, 4 to 17 years old, attends school as long as they are at Dilley. Classes include English as a second language, social studies, math and science. The average stay at Dilley is about 15½ days right now, he said.

Detainees may move about the 55-acre compound freely during the day. They wear either their own clothes or T-shirts, jeans and shoes given to them upon arrival. Unlike at the Border Patrol processing center where most of the families were taken after their initial arrests, none are required to surrender their shoelaces, and there are no cells or locked areas.

Immigration advocates have long objected to family detention centers and faulted the conditions. Numerous groups have pushed to have both Karnes and Dilley closed since the facilities were opened, during the Obama administration, when a crush of families were caught crossing the border illegally in 2014.

Katy Murdza, advocacy coordinator of the Dilley Pro Bono Project, which offers legal aid to detainees at the facility, said her group "has concerns with pretty much all" the services at the detention center, from medical care to education to food.

Mr. Bible said the detention facility meets or exceeds his agency's standards for caring for families.

The Trump administration has said zero-tolerance and family separation were part of a broader effort to deter would-be border crossers from trying to sneak into the U.S. The Obama administration also used family detention as a deterrence.

But it is unclear if the effort is having any impact on border crossings. In July, arrests at the border declined for the second straight month. The number of families caught crossing the border illegally was also down slightly, though arrests at the Mexican border historically dip during the hottest summer months.

Ms. Murdza said parents interviewed by her group worry about how the U.S. government will treat them once they arrive but opt to come anyway because conditions in their home country are so dire.

"They don't make this decision lightly," Ms. Murdza said. "They're doing it feeling they don't have any choice. We're still seeing so many families who said they were afraid to come, but they had no other choice."