

Groups urge Congress to better asylum seekers housing

<http://www.kmtv.com/news/local-news/groups-urge-congress-to-better-asylum-seekers-housing>

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OMAHA, Neb. (KMTV) - Faith and community leaders are urging Nebraska's Congressional Delegation to stand up for women and children fleeing violence in their countries.

Currently, women and children fleeing Central America wind up in family detention centers in Texas and Pennsylvania, in inadequate living conditions, according to advocates.

"Those fleeing violence, are subject to further trauma. Children should not be kept behind barbed wire," says Jeanne Schuler, one of the organizers with Omaha Together One Community (OTOC).

"We are here, to ask our delegation, our Nebraska delegation, to Washington, to shut down the detention centers," says Schuler.

Advocates say mothers and children who have fled horrific violence are being held, essentially locked up, against their will. They say there should be more humane, community-based alternatives to these detention centers.

"Women are carrying their children, 13,000 miles from Central America to the United States. And on the way, what little money they have usually gets stolen from them," says Dan Rock, an Omaha attorney who has visited Dilley, Texas, where one of the largest detention centers is located. "They sleep in the deserts or on the streets, and are often brutalized during their one-to-two week journey to the U.S."

Rock went on to say that this issue is not an immigration issue, but a humanitarian issue.

Congressman Brad Ashford, however, says fixing the asylum detention centers is an immigration issue.

"The real issue though, is Congress needs to address comprehensive immigration reform, and they need to fix the broken immigration system and that includes asylum seekers," says Ashford.

Ashford says more funding is needed to upgrade the facilities, but more importantly, there needs to be a clearer process for asylum seekers to apply for legal status. .

"When in fact, it is an asylum situation, Congress has to approve the process and we don't have these discussions about should they be able to apply and get a work permit, that type of thing. It should be clearly set."

Advocates of OTOC and Nebraska Appleseed are working to get 500 people to call the Nebraska delegation and urge Congress to better the housing conditions.

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<http://fox42kptm.com/features/beckas-beat/beckas-beat-when-babies-are-criminals>

Becka's Beat: When babies are criminals

By Tom Becka Wednesday, August 31st 2016

(Omaha) Fox 42 — Today Donald Trump met Mexico's president and gave a major speech on immigration. While that was going on this child was being detained by immigration authorities.

You see the immigration problem is a lot more than shouting build a wall and send them all back. Mothers and their children are also coming across the borders from places like the Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. They are seeking asylum from the violence in their countries. They are risking their lives and the lives of their children to come to America knowing there are no guarantees. Knowing they might be held by the authorities. Imagine being so bad off that this was your best option.

Now granted using a picture of an illegal immigrant baby is a bit of emotional blackmail. It's used to tug at your heart strings. It's much harder to think of this baby as a criminal than a migrant farm worker or roofer. But the truth is she's breaking the law just like they are.

Tomorrow at noon a group of church leaders are going to meet at Brad Ashford's office at 72nd and Pacific to ask congress to end the indefinite detention of women and children seeking asylum. They are going to try to bring to people's attention that it's more than drug dealers and rapists coming across the border. It's children too.

Now before you start sending me nasty emails I'm not suggesting open borders or amnesty. What I am suggesting is that we tone down the rhetoric and look for reasonable solutions to these problems.

The other night at a town hall meeting Donald Trump asked the audience if an illegal immigrant that has been here for years and has not broken any laws should have a way to be here legally. The majority of the audience said yes. The problem is the majority of people that might feel that way aren't speaking up. It's the loudest and angriest that get noticed. And the loudest and angriest are shouting build a wall and send them all back.

Tomorrow these church leaders will petition our representatives to hear the cry of these children. The ability to do that is one of the reasons people are fleeing their country to come here. God bless America.

Grace: She came to America seeking asylum and ended up in what felt like prison

http://www.omaha.com/columnists/grace/grace-she-came-to-america-seeking-asylum-and-ended-up/article_69b96742-064c-5f11-81f4-fc4f59a33f7a.html

By Erin Grace / World-Herald columnist

A woman we'll call Maria has come to the downtown Omaha office of her attorney, Kristin Fearnow, with a story to tell.

Maria's tale begins in her native El Salvador and continues with a harrowing 1,100-mile trip through Mexico. But freedom didn't come after she crossed the Rio Grande.

Instead, she and her 3-year-old daughter were apprehended and detained in a federal facility in Texas. It felt like a prison to Maria, who spent the next four and a half months in uncertainty and fear that she would be sent back to the dangerous place she fled.

Maria and her daughter, whom we'll call Blanca, were part of that massive exodus in 2014 and 2015, mainly from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Driven out by gang violence and organized crime, more than 100,000 sought refuge in the United States. Most were women and children.

In the past, asylum-seekers who entered the United States and passed an initial review were generally able to remain free until their cases could be decided.

But the 2014 flood — including children who had traveled by themselves — prompted a different response from the Obama administration. The government took steps to discourage people from leaving their home countries, paid Mexico to stem the tide at that nation's own southern border, quickly deported some who got here and set up detention centers to house others like Maria and Blanca during the first stage of their review process.

Over the past two years, more than 49,000 people have been sent to the controversial detention centers.

The federal government says the centers offer meals, health care, clothing and other services to families. There are soccer fields, playgrounds, classrooms, even Disney movies.

"Family residential centers are an effective and humane alternative for maintaining family unity as families go through immigration processing," said Carl Rusnok, a spokesman based in Dallas for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

But immigration rights advocates disagree with the federal policy of detaining asylum-seekers and with the bogged-down system that has left immigrants in those facilities for as long as a year. Critics say the system forces innocent children into an institutional, prisonlike setting and leaves immigrants in limbo about their future.

"This is so wrong, so inhumane, so contrary to everything the United States is supposed to be," said Dan Rock, an Omaha attorney who volunteered for a week in May to represent women seeking asylum at a detention center in Texas. "This is a humanitarian issue."

Rock spoke at a rally and press conference Thursday that drew some 75 people outside the Omaha office of Rep. Brad Ashford, D-Neb. The group had come to deliver a message to Ashford and to Sens. Deb Fischer and Ben Sasse, both Nebraska Republicans, whose offices they planned to visit later in the day.

The Omaha protest comes as immigration is on the front burner. One day earlier, for example, you may have heard about a certain Republican presidential candidate who flew to Mexico and later, in Arizona, talked about his favorite subject — building a border wall.

Donald Trump blasted President Barack Obama for not being tough enough on immigrants, while Thursday's press conference in Omaha featured people who think Obama has been too tough.

The detention centers are dressed-up prisons with a “facade of compassionate care,” said Kathleen Erickson, a Sister of Mercy from Omaha who spent two months as a chaplain at a center in Dilley, Texas.

Erickson said she saw mothers depressed and stressed as they tried to raise their children in such an unfamiliar setting, while facing the uncertainty and confusion of the immigration process. She said the immigrants don't know when they might be released — or if they will abruptly be sent back to their countries.

“I wish every mother in America could just think for a minute what it would be like,” Erickson said Thursday.

Another complaint is the lack of consistent legal representation. The government does not provide public defenders to help immigrants argue that they have a “credible fear” of persecution if they are deported.

Despite the national focus on immigration, the plight of the Central Americans arguably has received less attention since the tumultuous summer of 2014. About 69,000 unaccompanied children and 68,000 families were apprehended in the 2014-15 fiscal year, according to the U.S. Border Patrol. Many were sent right back to their home countries, but others were held at the detention centers.

As of Thursday, the federal government said a total of 2,207 women and children were at the three “residential centers”: 69 at Berks in Leesport, Pennsylvania; 582 in Karnes City, Texas; and 1,556 in Dilley, Texas.

Ashford, who was not present at the gathering outside his office, said in an interview that he understood the complaints but thought the centers were needed. He said he couldn't think of another way the federal government could deal with such a crush of asylum-seekers.

“What else do we do? Where else do we put them?” he said. “We can't just let them walk in. These people, they're safe, aren't they? It's not a good environment. But they're safe.”

Ashford said the detention centers represent a stop-gap response to a broken immigration system, which he blamed on congressional inaction. “A lot of this is the result of the utter failure of Congress to fix immigration,” he said.

Maria's story offers a window into the hardships faced by those who have come. While she is critical of the detention center, the worst part of her experience came before she reached America.

The 23-year-old spoke through an interpreter in her attorney's office, with her thick asylum file laid out for me to see. I saw Maria's real name, her alien registration number and the names and home cities of her relatives, including her husband, who is in Omaha. She spoke on condition that she not be

identified because the very threat she fled from in El Salvador — a vicious gang called MS-13 — has an Omaha presence. She fears for her life and the lives of family members still in El Salvador.

“Yes, I am afraid that the MS-13 will find me and rape me and kill me. I am also afraid (of what) they will do to my daughter,” she said in her asylum application. “If I am forced to return, there is no one that can protect me.”

El Salvador has a long history of violence and is one of the most dangerous countries in the world. For Maria, things came to a head in the summer of 2014.

Maria was then estranged from her husband, a man we’ll call Jose. Jose had left El Salvador two years before. She was raising Blanca alone and had what she called a good job working for a prosecutor in her town outside San Salvador, the capital. The prosecutor belonged to a right-leaning political party called ARENA, which Maria also had joined. ARENA was at odds with the left-leaning party, FMLN, which then had ties to the MS-13 gang.

The gang’s first warnings came in the form of letters — three separate ones — at her door. The message was consistent: Quit your job and leave your home. Or else.

Then came the “or else.” The gang paid two visits. A man with an MS-13 tattoo showed up at Maria’s home and told her that if she didn’t quit and leave the area, she would be raped and killed, and so would her young daughter. Later, three men with guns shoved Maria into a car.

“They told me I had 24 hours to leave home and work; that if I didn’t they would kill me,” she told U.S. immigration officials. “While they were doing this, they started touching my breast and private parts.”

The men then kicked her out of the car and left. Later that day, Maria stuffed some clothes in a bag and left El Salvador with her daughter and \$300. She didn’t tell her mother or her boss or anyone else except a friend in Guatemala who helped her map a route through Mexico. She was afraid of leaving a trail and didn’t want to jeopardize the safety of those she left behind.

Maria cried and prayed for five days on crowded buses heading north through Mexico. She was leered at and propositioned. She gave a smuggler all her cash and then lost her shoes in the Rio Grande as they hustled across the border to avoid the gunshots they heard. She walked barefoot with Blanca to a road where she was picked up by U.S. Border Patrol agents on July 30, 2014.

Maria and Blanca spent at least three days in a chilly concrete holding cell before being put on a bus and taken to the Karnes center.

Once there, Blanca got sick, Maria lost weight, and she felt she couldn’t trust the authorities. Around them were other women and children who had fled similar situations and were also sad and fearful.

On Aug. 13, 2014, after being interviewed by one immigration officer, Maria was told that she had not established enough of a case for asylum.

But Maria got lucky. An attorney took her case and appealed the decision. And in October, a judge agreed that she did have enough grounds to pursue her asylum case. That made her eligible to post a bond and get out of Karnes while her case went forward.

Maria again was lucky. She tracked down her estranged husband. He and a relative cobbled the \$8,500 she needed and wired it to Texas.

Right before Christmas in 2014, Maria and Blanca stepped off a bus and into another uncertain chapter. In Omaha.

Now living with her husband, she is awaiting a formal work permit so she can get a job. Blanca is in kindergarten.

How long they can stay is anyone's guess. An immigration trial is scheduled for November, and Maria's attorney said her case is stronger than most.

But nothing is guaranteed, Fearnow warned. "It's completely plausible she'll get denied."

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