

For Immediate Release

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DHS Changes to Family Detention Are Not Enough: Regardless of Reforms, Incarceration Traumatizes Women and Children Asylum Seekers

Although the Sisters of Mercy welcome Secretary Jeh Johnson changes to family detention, no amount of structural reforms can make the incarceration of mothers with children morally acceptable. We need to examine the consequence of perpetuating this system, instead of finding ways to mitigate the public's outrage.

The Sisters of Mercy's first-hand experience on the disastrous effect of family detention comes from one of our sisters, Kathleen Erickson, who just finish serving two months as the interim Chaplain at Dilley. In her position, Sister Kathleen had a unique role that allowed her to build relationships with both the staff of the detention facility and the detained women and children. During her time in Dilley, she also saw the facility grow from approximately 400 women and children in late March to over 1,000 by the end of May.

On June 11, Sister Kathleen testified on Capitol Hill about what she witnessed at the largest family detention facility in the country. She described to members of Congress and congressional staff the psychological trauma caused by incarcerating women and children asylum seekers. The Senate and House briefings exposed how the so-called "compassionate care" offered in these private prison facilities is a façade.

Today, in response to the DHS press release, Sister Kathleen Erickson states, "It cannot be said strongly enough that 'detaining' mothers and children is wrong. I have talked with mothers who cannot stop crying, who speak of how their children have changed while being held in detention, who talk of not being able to erase the image of dead bodies of family members being carried out of their home killed in the violence in their country of origin, of death threats they too received. How can the United States continue to exacerbate their trauma by holding them in a place unsuitable for children, with no understanding of when they will be released?"

June 20 marked the one-year anniversary of President Obama's reintroduction of family detention for potential asylum seekers. Last summer, when families and unaccompanied children were fleeing Central America at record numbers, the Department of Homeland Security asked religious organizations to open their doors to these women and children. The Sisters of Mercy, like many of our faith partners, were prepared to offer hospitality to this community. Then, with no explanation, our services were no longer requested, and the Obama administration opened the first family detention facility in New Mexico. Over the last year, the US government established a system to detain 3,700 women and children, primarily at two private prison facilities, the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas, and the Karnes City Residential Center, also located in Texas.

The faith community is still willing to welcome these families into our homes and ministries. Faith-based alternatives to detention have a high record of success. Additionally, according to USCIS own numbers, 88% of these families demonstrate credible fear. It does not make sense to continue to the expansion of family detention at a cost of \$343 per person, per night when superior options exist. Not only would the use of alternatives to detentions be more humane, it would also save the taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars, only costing between 17 cents to 17 dollars per person, per day.