

Immigration

U.S. weighs plan to phase out family detention at Texas facility, despite migration surge

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials are discussing a plan to phase out family detention at the Karnes County Residential Center in Texas, according to three Homeland Security officials, a move that would significantly reduce the government's capacity to hold parents with children as record numbers of migrant families are crossing the U.S. southern border.

ICE would instead use the Karnes facility to house easier-to-deport single adults, according to the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss plans that have not been finalized.

The Karnes facility is one of two large family "residential centers" ICE operates in South Texas, with a current detainee population of 528 adults and children. Families held there would be issued notices to appear in immigration court and would then be released into the U.S. interior, according to two officials with knowledge of the discussions.

ICE also operates the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Tex., with a current detainee population of 1,456, as well as a smaller facility in Berks County, Pa., which had 12 detainees Thursday, according to ICE.

More than 40,000 migrants crossed the southern border in family groups last month, a record, and parents with children now account for more than 60 percent of those taken into custody, according to the [latest U.S. figures](#).

Many of the families in ICE custody recently arrived from Central America and are seeking asylum. A backlog of more than 800,000 cases in U.S. immigration courts means the families might not see judges for several months or longer.

Because U.S. federal courts have limited the amount of time children can be held in immigration jails to 20 days, the families often are released into the U.S. interior anyway, sometimes with GPS ankle monitoring bracelets that allow ICE to track their whereabouts.

Danielle Bennett, an ICE spokeswoman, said the agency has no announcements to make.

"Ensuring there are sufficient beds available to meet the current demand for detention space is crucial to the success of ICE's overall mission," Bennett said in a statement. "Accordingly, the agency is continually reviewing

its detention requirements and exploring options that will afford ICE the operational flexibility needed to house the full range of detainees in the agency's custody."

The [Karnes facility](#), which is owned and operated by a private contractor, the GEO Group, housed single adults until 2014, when a surge of unaccompanied minors at the border prompted ICE to look for more child-appropriate facilities.

GEO Group spokesman Pablo Paez referred inquiries to ICE.

On its website, the company says detainees are provided with schooling, medical care, recreation and "life skills/chores," as well as "free time," and access to legal and religious services.

A charter school provides educational services in brightly decorated classrooms, and all children have the opportunity to go on monthly field trips to local parks and libraries. Meals include a salad bar and "tortilla bar," and unlimited access to snacks, juices and infant formula.

The plan under discussion comes days after the Trump administration rolled out a budget proposal with the goal of expanding the number of family detention beds to 10,000.

Families make up a small fraction of the more than 40,000 immigrants held daily in county jails, private prisons and detention facilities across the United States. Last year, a top ICE official compared the family residential centers to "summer camp," triggering a backlash from Democratic lawmakers.

Immigrant advocates say the facilities are effectively jails that hold children as young as infants with their parents, with [subpar medical care](#) provided.

One DHS official with knowledge of the discussions said the proposed change at the Karnes facility has not been finalized and could be temporary. The goal, the official said, would be to prioritize adult detainees who potentially pose a greater security risk.

Single adults also are significantly easier for ICE to remove from the country, so by increasing its ability to detain them, the agency can also meet the Trump administration's goal of increased deportations.

On Wednesday, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, a Texas-based nonprofit organization, sent a complaint to the Department of Homeland Security's inspector general and to the department's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties on behalf of several Karnes detainees. The organization said fathers with children as young as 5 years old had been detained for between 41 and 59 days in violation of a federal consent decree known as the Flores Settlement Agreement (FSA), which says children generally must be released after 20 days.


"Prolonged detention of children at the unlicensed Karnes Detention Center violates the FSA," the advocacy group said in the complaint.

The group called on the DHS to release the families and to “investigate other past and present violations” of the agreement.

Among the detainees cited in a news release are a man and his 15-year-old son who have been detained at Karnes since January although a federal official determined that they have “credible fears of torture or persecution” if they are forced to return home, and a man and his 6-year-old son who were held for 41 days until they were separated last week.

The detainee releases have frustrated President Trump, who calls them legal “loopholes” that are encouraging record numbers of families to cross the southern border illegally and file false asylum claims. Advocates say that the migrants are fleeing hunger, violence and poverty in Central America and other lands, and that they have the right under federal law to apply for asylum.

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