

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

U.S. Immigration Policy Harms Women, Families

*June 24 Briefing to Congress Details Inadequate Medical Care in Detention,
Separation from Family*

(Washington, D.C., June 24, 2009) – The U.S. government should reform immigration enforcement policies that inflict needless suffering on immigrant women and their families, a former immigration detention center nurse, a former detainee, and a group of leading human rights advocacy and research groups said today at a Capitol Hill briefing.

Immigration detention is the fastest growing form of incarceration in the United States. On any given day, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) holds 33,000 immigrants in detention, about 10 percent of them women. Detainees include asylum seekers, victims of trafficking, survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence, pregnant women, and mothers of children who are U.S. citizens.

“The vast majority of women I interviewed posed no security threat or flight risk,” said Nina Rabin, director of border research at the Southwest Institute for Research on Women and director of the Bacon Immigration Law and Policy Program at Rogers College of Law at the University of Arizona. “One of the most effective ways to deal with immigration enforcement is simply not to detain so many people and instead use a wide range of alternatives.”

The hosts for today’s briefing are the National Coalition for Immigrant Women’s Rights; American Civil Liberties Union; Human Rights Watch; Legal Momentum; National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum; National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health; and the Women’s Refugee Commission.

The briefing will be held in cooperation with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus; the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus; and the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

Kathleen Baldoni, who worked as a nurse at Willacy Detention Center, the largest immigration detention center in the country, said that women there often are subjected to extreme temperatures, inadequate nutrition, medical staffing shortages and long delays for critically needed health care.

“I was prevented from providing the level of care ethically required of me as a health care provider,” said Baldoni. “Nursing and medical staff are genuinely caring people who want to do the best for their patients but we are often hampered by the system. Not only are the detainees in danger but the medical staff, who face liability issues are as well.”

A March 2009 report by Human Rights Watch found that while current standards allow for emergency medical care and treatment for detained immigrants, they are insufficient to cover women’s unique

physical, social, emotional, and health care needs. These include gynecological exams, pre- and post-natal care, and treatment for those who have been victims of sexual assault and domestic violence.

“It is appalling that ICE does not provide women in its custody with enough sanitary pads to keep from bleeding through their clothes, to say nothing of sufficient Pap smears, mammograms, and the other most basic elements of women’s health care,” said Meghan Rhoad, researcher in the Women’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch. “It is bad enough that these women are locked up. The least the government can do is to give them decent care.”

Emily Butera, program officer at the Women’s Refugee Commission, said that ICE’s focus on emergency care and keeping detainees medically ready for deportation is misplaced. “ICE needs to take into account the pressing humanitarian needs of individuals not held on criminal charges,” she said. “In addition to poor conditions in detention facilities, our immigration and enforcement policies are needlessly endangering the well-being of vulnerable people and tearing apart families.”

In fact, the advocates point out, women are being separated from their children, permanently in many cases, at great cost to society. In some cases, mothers are detained and taken to detention facilities hundreds of miles away without being given the opportunity to make the most basic arrangements for the care of their children. While in detention they are denied access to telephones and the legal materials necessary to locate their children and communicate with family courts to preserve their parental rights.

“ICE took me from my home while my children watched in fear,” said Marlene Jaggernaut, a single parent who was separated from her four children, all of them U.S. citizens, and who will speak at today’s event. “Had I not experienced a year in immigration detention, I would never have believed that such inhumanity existed.”

To read the January 2009 University of Arizona Southwest Institute for Research on Women report, “Unseen Prisoners: A Report on Women in Immigration Detention Facilities in Arizona,” please visit:

<http://sirow.arizona.edu/files/UnseenPrisoners.pdf>

To read the March 2009 Human Rights Watch report, “Detained and Dismissed: Women’s Struggles to Obtain Health Care in United States Immigration Detention,” please visit:

<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/03/16/detained-and-dismissed>

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