



Detained and forgotten

Immigration detention centers in California lack oversight and proper care, reports find

BY ANNA GORMAN AND ANA B. IBARRA / California Healthline

Staff members at immigration detention centers

in California delayed medical appointments for patients complaining of shortness of breath. They inadequately supervised suicidal youths. And in one case, they failed to refer a patient with dangerously low blood pressure to a physician.

These and other health and safety problems were detailed in two reports released on February 26. The reports, produced by state Attorney General Xavier Becerra and State Auditor Elaine Howle, found that the inadequate medical care, along with other health and safety risks, posed a serious danger to immigration detainees.

Becerra and Howle blamed the federal and local governments for failing to oversee the detention centers, allowing the health and safety violations to persist. "Everyone in this country has constitutional rights, and everyone at the end of the day, child and adult, deserves to be treated in a humane way," Becerra said at a news conference in San Francisco.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is committed to "ensuring all detainees are treated in a humane and professional manner," spokeswoman Lori Haley countered in a written statement. "The safety, rights and health of detainees in ICE's care are of paramount concern and all ICE detention facilities are subject to stringent, regular inspections."

Haley's statement didn't discuss the specific findings in the reports.

Becerra described his report as an initial look at conditions in the 10 California centers that housed immigration detainees in 2017, when his review began. The centers, overseen by ICE, hold people awaiting immigration hearings or deportation. The federal centers have come under increased scrutiny as President Donald Trump has stepped up immigration enforcement, with reports of deaths, abuse and substandard medical care.

Over the past three years, nearly 75,000 immigrant detainees were housed in the 10 California facilities. The immigrants, who stayed an average of more than 50 days, were held in civil, not criminal, detention.

The federal Office of Inspector General also examined detention facilities and revealed health and safety problems such as nooses in cells and "improper and overly restrictive segregation."

"The standards are so low for these detention centers, and they are not regulated the way that they should be," said Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights.

In addition to one-day visits to all of the facilities, Becerra's Department of Justice conducted more comprehensive investigations of three: the Yolo County Juvenile Detention Facility, Theo Lacey Facility in Orange County and the West County Detention Facility in Contra Costa County. Contra Costa County decided last year no longer to house immigrant detainees in its facility.

The department found a number of health and safety problems in the centers:

Staff at the Yolo facility did not adequately address the mental health needs of detainees and overused psychotropic medications. One youth had been cutting himself but wasn't put under a special watch. Providers conducted

superficial medical examinations that failed to rule out serious injuries or health conditions, including one case in which a detainee complained of testicular pain.

A shortage of bilingual medical staff compromised the confidentiality of medical care and made it more difficult to access care.

Unqualified personnel, including detention officers, deputies and licensed vocational nurses, made medical decisions. Dental services were often

delayed, including one case in which a detainee needed urgent care for a probable "tooth eruption." Other detainees were denied fillings and root canal procedures.

Becerra said the federal government is not ensuring its own standards are met. And while some of the facilities already have made changes, he said he will continue monitoring them to ensure they adequately address their shortcomings. He didn't rule out legal action.

A separate but equally damning report by the state auditor concluded that California cities that contract with ICE to house immigration detainees are not providing adequate oversight, putting the detainees' health and safety at risk. □

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