Report Details Abuse and Medical Neglect at Immigrant Detention Centers

(CN) – A report released Thursday by immigration watchdogs shines an unflattering light on the Trump administration’s treatment of asylum seekers and detainees, finding a lack of adequate medical care and oversight at detention centers as the number of facilities and detainees grows. Researchers from the American Civil Liberties Union, Human Rights Watch and National Immigrant Justice Center compiled interviews with 150 detainees, notes from visits to five new detention sites and public records for their report titled, “Justice-Free Zones: U.S. Immigration Detention Under the Trump Administration.” The total number of detention facilities in the U.S. has climbed to 220 as Immigration and Customs Enforcement opened more than 40 new sites since President Donald Trump took office in January 2017, most of which are hours-long drives from nearby cities. Asylum seekers’ access to legal counsel has suffered as a result, according to the civil rights groups. “When comparing immigration detention facilities operating before 2017 to those opened after 2017, there are four times as many immigration attorneys available within a 100-mile radius of pre-existing facilities versus new ones,” the report states. Though detainees may apply for release on parole, few have been able to convince judges that they have a credible fear of persecution in their home countries. ICE’s New Orleans field office, which has control over 70% of people held in the new detention centers, denied 99.1% of asylum seekers’ applications for release on parole between March and December 2019, according to the report. The Southern facilities were not outliers. The researchers note that immigration courts across the nation deny asylum in 76% of detainees’ cases – at half of the 20 largest new facilities, that number jumps to over 90%. Interviewees told the researchers that facility officers lied to them about the availability of parole, for instance by saying it was only granted to detainees who were dying or that receiving parole was simply not a possibility. Four-fifths of detainees in the U.S. are held in privately owned or operated facilities as of January, the report notes, with CoreCivic and the GEO Group together holding more than half of ICE’s detention contracts. These private contractors allegedly often require detainees to clean and maintain facilities for no pay, or for as low as $1 per day, though the report cites multiple interviews with detainees who say they have worked for weeks or months without receiving any promised pay. GEO has previously donated nearly a quarter of a million dollars to pro-Trump super PACs. With more than 50,000 people detained in U.S. immigration facilities on any given day, the centers have implemented cost-cutting measures that undermine the health and safety of detainees, according to the report. Interviewees accused the facilities of acting slowly on necessary treatments, such as taking as long as a week to set broken bones or failing to offer inhalers for asthma and other life-saving medicine. At one Louisiana facility, detainees said there was no soap in the showers or cleaning supplies for detainees’ cells. Medical staff at another center in Louisiana took several minutes to locate their defibrillator, which was in a hallway instead of the emergency room, which “held only a stretcher,” according to the report. The report notes that 39 adults have died in ICE custody or soon after release since 2017, highlighting that 12 of these were suicides in detention. There were no mental health professionals on site at two of the five detention sites, the report states, and immigrants reported guards yelling at physically handicapped detainees instead of helping them. Researchers also detailed accusations of abuse from immigration officers, who would withhold food from detainees, slam immigrants against the wall and call them “rats.” Interviewers heard multiple reports of detainees being locked in solitary confinement for as long as nearly three months. The Covid-19 pandemic has shut out watchdogs’ access to information from immigration officials, according to Eunice Cho, a senior ACLU staff attorney. “ICE is not known for its transparency during ‘normal’ circumstances, but the limited access we had for this report — to detention facilities, to detained people — no longer exists,” Cho said in a statement. Grace Meng, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, urged lawmakers to push back against the administration’s treatment of immigrants. “The Trump administration and its callous indifference to immigrants’ rights and their humanity have allowed already bad conditions in the detention system to deteriorate even further,” Meng said in a statement. “But the administration is not the only one responsible for this abusive system — Congress should push back on the administration’s demands and reduce funding for immigration detention and enforcement.” The report recommends a number of solutions for Congress, executive offices and departments, and state and local governments. The groups call for an end to mandatory immigrant detention, banning solitary confinement, allowing Freedom of
Information Act requests for records held by private detention facility operators, and permitting the release of asylum seekers to community sponsors. “We need Congress to take notice and stop spending our tax dollars to fund these human rights abuses,” said Tara Cullen, communications director of the National Immigrant Justice Center.