



May 21, 2015

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write on behalf of the Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM), the nation's largest coalition of immigrant rights organizations, to urge the immediate release of the families currently being held in U.S. detention centers. Those detained include mothers and their children who have valid asylum claims and others who have fled extreme violence and danger.

FIRM believes that locking up mothers and their children just doesn't make sense and is not reflective of our values as a country either. This view is supported by recent federal court rulings calling into question the legality of the current policy on the detention of families as well as prior policy under your Administration, which favored a more limited use of family detention in only the most rare cases.

We urge you, Mr. President, to seize this moment and do what's right for the families seeking refuge in the U.S. Women and children running from extreme danger should not be held in prisons when they arrive to our country or while they seek asylum. Women like Linda, a mother from Honduras who is detained with her child Marvin at the Berks Family Residential Center in Leesport, Pennsylvania. They have been locked up – *without bond* – for 13 months. Linda went through “expedited removal” the first time she entered the U.S. (and was sent back to Honduras just four days after she arrived in the U.S.) She was not properly screened for asylum when she first attempted to enter the U.S. and was removed in contravention of domestic and international laws protecting asylum seekers. Linda took the dangerous journey back to the U.S. less than two months after her removal because she feared for her life if she remained in Honduras. This time she brought Marvin. Linda was screened for asylum when she re-entered the U.S. and was found to have a reasonable fear of returning to her country. Nevertheless, she remains in detention with her child while she pursues her asylum claim. We request the immediate release of Linda and Marvin so that they can remain at liberty while they prepare their asylum case.

FIRM is also deeply troubled by multiple reports of abuse and misconduct by detention officials at the Berks family detention center in Pennsylvania. We have received reports that the facility is failing to provide adequate nutrition, health care, and education to children held in custody. In addition, ICE officials in Pennsylvania have been criticized for failing to conduct required periodic custody reviews and failing to respond to parole requests made by families.

It has come to our attention that a sexual assault by one of the guards against one of the mothers previously detained at the facility occurred and that a child being detained witnessed the crime. There appears to have been no counseling or therapy provided to the other women or children detained at the facility, and no significant efforts by the facility to prevent future assaults from happening again, e.g., training staff on appropriate interactions with detained women or how to work with victims of severe sexual abuse, which is the case with many of the women detained at the facility.

We have also received complaints that officials at this facility consistently threaten the families with reprisals if they don't "cooperate" with guards' demands. We have received reports that staff has on multiple occasions threatened to provide negative information about family members to immigration judges. Detention officials threatened to send the woman from Honduras mentioned above to another facility far away from her attorney, which would have had a negative impact on her case. In another case reported to us, a detained mother who participated with local authorities in the investigation of the sexual assault incident was placed on "suicide watch" as a disciplinary action for telling a joke. The woman was locked in a room for at least 24 hours with her two children.

These reports are consistent with those from a second family detention center in Karnes, Texas. The Karnes detention facility has come under public scrutiny in recent weeks after 78 mothers launched a hunger strike to protest their detention and the detention of their children. Children at the facility are exhibiting signs of depression, refusing to eat or do schoolwork.

These troubling stories are not limited to the family detention system. They mirror larger systemic problems in our nation's immigration enforcement and criminal justice systems. Across the country, the abuse of immigrants in detention and inmates held in prisons is well-documented.

We hope, as the Administration reevaluates its use of family detention, you will put the needs of these families first by providing them with the full and fair opportunity to have their cases heard and allow them to remain in the community while they pursue their immigration claims.

FIRM believes now is the time, under your leadership, to end our nation's inhumane history of detaining families once and for all.

Sincerely,

Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice, ACIJ  
Alliance for a Just Society, AJS  
Arkansas United Community Coalition, AUCC  
CASA  
Causa Oregon  
Center for Community Change, CCC  
Center for Popular Democracy, CPD  
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights Los Angeles, CHIRLA  
Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, CIRC  
Comunidades Unidas, CU, Utah  
Consejo de Federaciones Mexicanas, COFEM  
EL CENTRO de Igualdad y Derechos, New Mexico  
Florida Immigrant Coalition, FLIC  
Idaho Community Action Network, ICAN  
Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, ICIRR  
Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Iowa CCI  
Junta for Progressive Action, JUNTA, Connecticut  
Latin American Coalition, LAC, North Carolina  
Maine People's Alliance  
Make The Road New York  
Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugees Advocacy Coalition, MIRA  
Michigan United  
National Korean American Services and Educational Consortium, NAKASEC  
National Partnership for New Americans, NPNA  
National People's Action, NPA  
Nebraska Appleseed  
New Hampshire Alliance for Immigrant Rights-MIRA  
New York Immigration Coalition, NYIC  
One America, Washington  
Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition, PICC  
Pinos y Campesinos Unidos del Noreste, PCUN, Oregon  
Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, PLAN  
Promise Arizona, PAZ  
Rights for All People, RAP, Colorado  
Somos un Pueblo Unido, New Mexico  
Sunflower Community Action, Kansas  
Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, TIRRC  
Voces de la Frontera, Wisconsin  
Washington-CAN!  
Workers Defense Project, WDP, Texas

cc: Jeh Johnson, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security  
Alejandro Mayorkas, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security  
Sarah Saldaña, Assistant Secretary of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement  
Cecilia Muñoz, Assistant to the President and Director of the Domestic Policy Council  
Caroline Bettinger-López, White House Advisor on Violence Against Women  
Leon Fresco, Deputy Assistant Attorney General, Office of Immigration Litigation, Civil Division, Department of Justice  
Stevan Bunnell, General Counsel, Department of Homeland Security  
Megan Mack, Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Department of Homeland Security  
Claire Trickler-McNulty, Deputy Director, Office of Detention Policy and Planning, Immigration and Customs Enforcement