

Statement of Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, MSpS, on State District Judge ruling, Texas Attorney General appeal concerning issuance of children care licenses to federal detention centers

The continuing court battle concerning the issuance of child care licenses to two federal detention centers in Dilley and Karnes City which hold migrant and refugee women and children is deeply disturbing and bitterly disappointing.

On Friday, a state district court judge ruled that the Department of Family and Protective Services could not license the facilities as residential child-care centers. This decision was a victory for common sense. As I have stated previously, many of these women are fleeing violence, in fear of their lives and the safety of their children. They need mercy and compassion, not derision and detention.

Today, the Texas attorney general inexplicably appealed the judge's ruling. In the past, the attorney general has argued that state licensing improves safety before it requires the facilities to submit to unannounced inspections and background check requirements.

We have just finished a tour of the detention facility in Dilley, which currently holds hundreds of family members from Central America. I also had the opportunity to visit Karnes Detention Center in Karnes, TX, a few months ago, which also is holding these families.

After these visits, the primary question in my mind is: Why? Why do we feel compelled to place in detention such vulnerable individuals—young mothers with children who are fleeing persecution in their home countries? They have already gone through a horrific experience on their journey to safety at the hands of smugglers and others, victims of violence and sexual assault.

So many of these mothers and children are detained in my archdiocese. They hold a special place in my heart. As their pastor and shepherd, we share a special bond. It is my loving responsibility to minister to them in their time of distress and invite them to be part of our family of faith and feel the healing and compassionate embrace of God through us.

Not long ago, I visited the mothers and children being detained in Karnes City. While there, I met a mother who gave birth to her child while she made the terrifying journey to escape violence in her home country. I visited with her as she tearfully told me of her pilgrimage of what she hoped would be freedom and safety. She told me that every night she prayed that her baby would one day be baptized. It was with joy I baptized her 6-week old daughter, Valerie and gave this uncommon gift of grace to her mother. As her "pastor", it is what I am called to do.

It is clear from our interactions today that these families are no threat to us, yet we detain them as if they are threats. And in so doing, we increase their trauma. A great nation such as ours need not incarcerate the most vulnerable in the name of deterrence. Rather, we should offer them the fair opportunity to seek and receive legal protection.

There are humane alternatives to the detention of these families, where they could be cared for in the community and provided appropriate support, including legal representation. This would better allow them to pursue legal protection and due process. We should not continue to expand bed space for these families, but pursue these alternatives.

The moral character of a society is judged by how it treats the most vulnerable in its midst. Our nation's family detention policy is shameful and I implore our elected leaders to end it.