

July 24, 2015

Secretary Jeh Johnson  
Department of Homeland Security  
3801 Nebraska Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Johnson:

We the undersigned organizations call for the Department of Homeland Security to immediately end its contract with Etowah County, Alabama to house immigration detainees at the Etowah County Detention Center (ECDC). Claims of abusive conditions in ECDC are so rampant that many organizations rank it “among the worst [detention facilities] in the country.”<sup>1</sup> All previous attempts at oversight and reform have failed to resolve fundamental problems at ECDC. The [complaint](#) filed recently by Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) watchdog agencies is only the latest in a series of reports documenting ECDC’s substandard conditions.<sup>2</sup> We believe that DHS must immediately end its contract with ECDC.

Over the last two years, CIVIC gathered detailed testimony and evidence from detainees inside and outside the ECDC, their family members, and advocates. The complaint paints a harrowing picture of systemic abuse by ECDC facility staff and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents stationed at ECDC. Among the most serious abuses, complainants state that refusals to sign travel documents or other immigration documentation lead to retaliation, often in the form of beatings. Mismanaged healthcare and a reckless disregard for the safety of detainees reportedly contribute to a climate of fear and intimidation in the ECDC. Racial slurs and discrimination are reportedly commonplace. The complaint also alleges that many detained immigrants, including some of the complainants, have been detained for many months, sometimes years – raising concerns that DHS routinely utilizes ECDC to warehouse prolonged and indefinitely detained individuals.

In addition to ending its contract with Etowah County, DHS must take stock of what went wrong in order to make sure lessons are learned from mistakes. DHS’s Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties must conduct a thorough and comprehensive investigation and guarantee that complainants will not suffer retaliation by DHS or ECDC facility staff.

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<sup>1</sup> Detention Watch Network, “Expose & Close: Etowah County Jail,” November 2012, *available at* <http://bit.ly/1t2HBL>

<sup>2</sup> CIVIC, “Multi-individual complaint – Etowah County Detention Center,” <http://www.endisolation.org/etowah>; *see also* “The State of Civil Rights at Immigration Detention Facilities,” Testimony by Carl Takei, National Prison Project, American Civil Liberties Union before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, January 30, 2015, *available at* <http://bit.ly/1fkr88A>; “Immigrant Detainees Land in Limbo in Alabama Jail,” *NBC News*, August 21, 2012, *available at* <http://nbcnews.to/1ROIFrI>; Women’s Refugee Commission, “Politicized Neglect: A Report from Etowah County Detention Center,” March 2012, *available at* <http://bit.ly/1COUnvu>

DHS cannot continue to ignore the ongoing crisis in the U.S. immigration detention system – a system so massive and mismanaged that violations of due process and human rights are routine. The ECDC exemplifies the worst facilities in the system, and therefore must be permanently closed. ECDC detainees should be released, or in the alternative, transferred to facilities in close proximity to their families, community support, and legal counsel, in accordance with ICE’s detainee transfer directive.<sup>3</sup>

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Jessica Vosburgh, Staff Attorney at the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) and Director of the Adelante Alabama Worker Center at [jvosburgh@ndlon.org](mailto:jvosburgh@ndlon.org) or 205.317.1481.

Adelante Alabama Worker Center (a project of NDLON)  
Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice  
Alterna (LaGrange, GA)  
Birmingham Peace Project  
Detention Watch Network  
Families for Freedom  
Greater Birmingham Ministries  
Hispanic Catholic Social Services (Birmingham, AL)  
National Day Laborer Organizing Network  
National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild  
The Ordinary People Society (Dothan, AL)  
Project South Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide  
Southeast Immigrant Rights Network  
Southerners on New Ground

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement, “Policy 11022.1: Detainee Transfers,” January 4, 2012, available at <http://www.ice.gov/doclib/detention-reform/pdf/hd-detainee-transfers.pdf>