

## GUEST COMMENTARY

# Confronting the American refugee crisis in Texas

By TIM and KERRY CONRAD

Standard-Examiner contributors

**F**amily detention of women and children has become big business for Corrections Corporation of America, a for-profit prison company raking in millions in profits by jailing women and children fleeing crime and violence in Central America.

The CCA operates the largest detention center for Central American mothers and their children.

Hidden on a back highway in the small town of Dilley, Texas, 70 miles southwest of San Antonio, the 2,400-bed prison is called the South Texas Family Residential Center. CCA reported that, in the first quarter of 2015 alone, Dilley generated \$36 million in revenue.

Because of the focus on profit and despite the humane, much-less-expensive options documented in the International Detention Coalition's Revised Community Assessment and Placement Model, alternative approaches to family detention are ignored.

Embracing American and religious values of welcoming the stranger, CARA was given permission to enter the detention center in Dilley to provide free legal and other support, otherwise unavailable to the detained mothers and their children.

The acronym CARA stands for these groups: Catholic Legal Immigration Network, the American Immigration Lawyers Association, Raices (Roots), and the American Immigration Council.

CARA promotes the dignity and protects the rights of immigrants and refugees in partnership with a dedicated network of pro bono lawyers and law students, as well as city and community immigration groups.

My wife and I are longtime Ogden residents and teachers. We volunteered for CARA at the Dilley Detention Center in August. We conducted intake interviews of women seeking asylum, reached out to their children, helped moms make calls to their families desperate to find out if they were safe, translated for attorneys who did not speak Spanish and learned how to enter data into the CARA computer system.

Mothers and children shared heart-breaking stories of thousand-mile combi-

### WANT TO HELP?

For information about how you can help Central American women and children being held at the detention center in Dilley, Texas, by donating money or volunteering for one week or a weekend, visit the CARA Family Detention Pro Bono Representation and Advocacy Project website, [cliniclegal.org/CARA](http://cliniclegal.org/CARA).

**PAGE 10A:** More on the crisis involving Central American refugee children

nations of walks, bus and train rides and sleeping in dingy apartments or in alleys or fields as they tried to escape rape, murder and starvation in Central America.

From all over the U.S., lawyers, college students, legal studies students, translators, document managers and others donate their services as they rotate a week at a time, or over a weekend, to secure credible interviews of mothers for Homeland Security and an appearance before a judge on video.

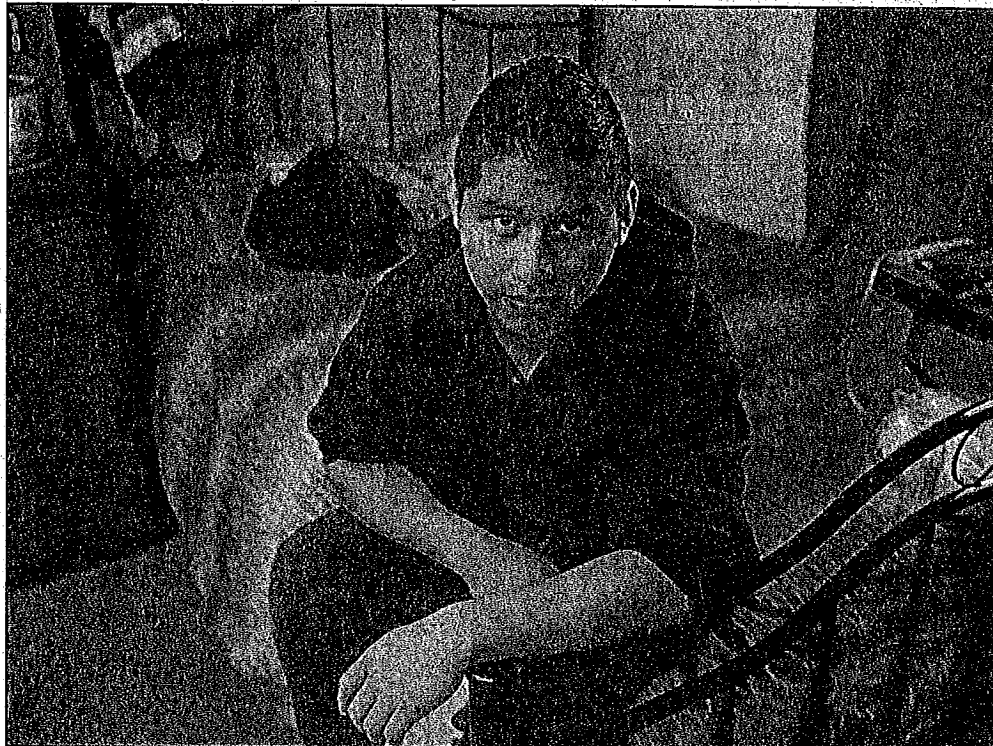
They are hoping for at least a temporary release on bond to a family member or sponsor, as well as proper medical care for their children, many of whom are sick.

Those released often stay at the Mennonite House in San Antonio until their sponsors and family members pick them up or their bus departs. At the house, they are greeted by the smells of delicious food, and the children can run around and play. For the first time in many weeks or months of detention, the mothers can put on makeup and earrings and wear their wedding rings.

One of the attorneys we worked with volunteered with his daughter, a law student at a university in California. She urged her father to join and even delayed her wedding because she wanted to be a part of this effort.

We must continue to help discover long-term solutions to our American refugee crisis. We are all Americans, north and south, sharing the same desire to have safe homes and meaningful lives for our children.

*Tim and Kerry Conrad live in Ogden.*



MARK J. TERRILL/The Associated Press

In September 2014, says Marvin Velasco, 15, seen at his new home in Los Angeles earlier this month, he realized that nine other people lived in the apartment of his first sponsor in the U.S., a distant relative whom he had never met. The sponsor told Velasco he would be punished if he left the apartment, then demanded rent payments. When Velasco told the sponsor he wanted to study, the man called the boy's parents in Guatemala, threatening to kick him out if they didn't pay. Then the man started withholding food, the teen says.

# Feds' failures imperil migrant children

Thousands fleeing violence in C. America face lax policies in United States

By GARANCE BURKE  
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — As tens of thousands of children fleeing violence in Central America crossed the border in search of safe harbor, overwhelmed U.S. officials weakened child protection policies, placing some young migrants in homes where they were sexually assaulted, starved or forced to work for little or no pay, an Associated Press investigation has found.



Velasco poses for a photo with his new sponsor, Ingrid Ainspac, at their home. After escaping from a previous sponsor who was abusive, he sought sanctuary in a nearby church, where he met Ainspac, a parishioner who took him in and became his legal guardian. Her Guatemalan immigrant family is raising him as a family member.

**PAGE 4A:** How you can help refugees from Central America and sought sanctuary in a nearby church, where he met a parishioner who be-

they were sexually assaulted, starved or forced to work for little or no pay, an Associated Press investigation has found.

Without enough beds to house the record numbers of young arrivals, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services lowered its safety standards during border surges in the last three years to swiftly move children out of government shelters and into sponsors' homes.

The procedures were increasingly relaxed as the number of young migrants rose in response to spiraling gang and drug violence in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, according to emails, agency memos and operations manuals obtained by AP, some under the Freedom of Information Act.

First, the government stopped fingerprinting most adults seeking to claim the children. In April 2014, the agency stopped requiring original copies of birth certificates to prove most sponsors' identities.

The next month, it decided not to complete forms that request sponsors' personal and identifying information before sending many of the children to sponsors' homes. Then, it eliminated FBI criminal history checks for many sponsors.

Since the rule changes, the AP has identified more than two dozen children who were placed with sponsors who subjected them to sexual abuse, labor trafficking, or severe abuse and neglect.

"This is clearly the tip of the iceberg," said Jacqueline Bhabha, research director at the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University. "We would never release domestic children to private settings with as little scrutiny."

Advocates say it is hard to gauge the total number of children exposed to dangerous conditions among the more than 89,000 placed with sponsors since October 2013 because social workers could not find many of the migrants designated for follow-up.

The advocates and contractors also say they repeatedly warned HHS beginning in 2012 about the steady increase in children arriving at the border. Even the agency warned

and sought sanctuary in a nearby church, where he met a parishioner who became his legal guardian. He now is living with a Guatemalan immigrant family that is raising him as their son.

#### **PAGE 4A:** How you can help refugees from Central America

case-management staff the following year of "fraudulent sponsors" in Colorado, Iowa and Minnesota who had sought to claim multiple, unrelated minors.

Federal officials won't disclose details of how the agency was stretched so thin, but say they are strengthening procedures as the number of young migrants once again rises, and recently signed a contract to open new shelters.

"We are not taking shortcuts," said HHS spokesman Mark Weber. "The program does an amazing job overall."

One of the cases reviewed by the AP involved a then-14-year-old from Guatemala who arrived in the U.S. in September 2014 and was sent to a sponsor's apartment in Los Angeles, where he was held for three weeks. Marvin Velasco said his sponsor, a distant relative whom he had never met, deprived him of food.

"He told authorities that he was going to take me to school and help me with food and clothing, but it wasn't like that at all," said Velasco, who since has been granted special legal status for young immigrants. "The whole time, I was just praying and thinking about my family."

Unlike the extensive screenings required in the U.S. foster care system, HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement had stopped requiring that social workers complete extensive background checks or fingerprint most sponsors when they placed Velasco with his brother-in-law's father.

Social workers never visited the apartment before Velasco arrived or checked on him afterward, said Gina Manciatì, the boy's attorney.

Velasco said there were nine others living in the apartment and the sponsor demanded rent and told him he would be punished if he left. When Velasco told the sponsor he wanted to study, the man called the boy's parents in Guatemala, threatening to kick him out if they didn't pay.

With help from the sponsor's son, Velasco escaped

and sought sanctuary in a nearby church, where he met a parishioner who became his legal guardian. He now is living with a Guatemalan immigrant family that is raising him as their son.

Other accounts uncovered by the AP include:

- A Honduran girl, 14, whose stepfather forced her to work at cantinas in Florida where women drink, dance and sometimes have sex with patrons.

- A 17-year-old from Honduras sent to live in Texas with an aunt who forced her to work in a restaurant at night and clean houses on weekends, and often locked her in the home.

- A 17-year-old Guatemalan placed in the home of a friend's brother in Alabama, where he was made to work in a restaurant for 12 hours a day to earn rent.

- A Central American teen placed with a family friend who forced her to cook, clean and care for younger children in a Florida trailer park.

Experts including a psychologist and an attorney cited cases in which unaccompanied children were raped by relatives or other people tied to their sponsors.

Weber said ORR has added more home visits and background checks since July, when federal prosecutors charged sponsors and associates with running a trafficking ring in rural Ohio that forced six unaccompanied minors to work on egg farms under threat of death for up to 12 hours a day.

"I know we learn from lessons and keep trying to improve the system to ensure the child is placed in a safe place, and I'm confident the vast majority of the kids are," Weber said.

Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, who chairs the Senate's bipartisan Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, said he will hold a hearing on the agency's child placement program Thursday because he is concerned that the failures are systemic.

"We think reforms are necessary and urgently required because there are kids right now who are coming in over the border," Portman said. "This is a problem that has to be addressed."