

Immigration and LGBTQs: Inside ICE detention

Part four

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February 4, 2015



Housing Unit.

Undocumented immigrants who are arrested by Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in Illinois are often detained at facilities scattered across the state. They include the Jefferson County Justice Center in

Mount Vernon, the McHenry County Adult Correctional Facility in Woodstock and the Tri-County Detention Center in Ullin.

Windy City Times was permitted to tour the ICE detention center at the medium-security McHenry County Adult Correctional Facility in Woodstock, Illinois located some 50 miles from Chicago.

According to ICE Deputy Assistant Director Andrew Lorenzen-Strait, it is operated within an Intergovernmental Service Agreement (IGSA), a contract with a local county jail for ICE to essentially rent bed space.

“A lot of our detention is dedicated—where we own and operate it and have contractors do the actual maintenance of it,” he explained. “But the facilities predominantly in the Midwest happen to be with IGSA’s and in the county space. So they’re operating with two independent systems. [The facility’s] inmate criminal justice system comes with its own standards and procedures. But they also have to attend to our requirements under our immigration detention standards.”

The McHenry County facility is a beige angular building tucked away in a historic, modestly populated town bordered by wide-open farmland. It was opened in 1992 and remodeled 13 years later. It has a current capacity of 650 male and female detainees housed in four blocks depending on their classification.

Windy City Times was not permitted to take any photographs, bring in any recording devices or interact with any of the detainees. The tour was led by McHenry County Sheriff’s Office Lieutenant of Corrections Michael R. Lukas and accompanied by a small cadre of ICE staff. They were receptive to questions with candid amiability and oftentimes a sharply honed sense of humor.

The antiseptic visitor’s entrance is equipped with lockers and a room containing a series of video monitors. Rather than the more traditional manner in which the detainee is separated from her/his family members and by thick plexiglass, the McHenry County facility uses a system of video-visits akin to an in-building Skype session with the detainees remaining in their block during the visit. More interpersonal face-to-face encounters are reserved for attorneys or one-on-one pastoral care provided by the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago.

Windy City Times was told the technology would eventually be further upgraded for web-based visits negating the need for family members to travel to the facility. ICE hopes this will prove particularly useful for those detainees wishing to enjoy visits from family living abroad.

The same system is used for court appearances. Inside the jail, there is a small video-courtroom complete with a dock for the detainees to stand and face the judge presiding over their case via a monitor. Close to the

courtroom, there is waiting area equipped with air-mattresses on which a few detainees could be seen dozing. Others were hunched in a corner or pacing the floor—their jumpsuits obscured by a blanket wrapped tightly around their bodies. Staff members routinely check on them, logging each visit with a piece of silver equipment known as a “pipe.”

The first glimpse a detainee receives of their new home is the broad in-take area attached to an enclosed “sally port” from which they are unloaded from transportation, subjected to a thorough pat down, fingerprinted by laser, photographed, issued jumpsuits and underwear while their personal belongings are inventoried and tightly sealed in a plastic bag that is placed in a secure property room. From the moment they enter the facility—other than narrow windows in detainee’s cells—light becomes artificial. Even the lofty, triangular exercise areas are completely enclosed in concrete. Each contains exercise equipment and bleachers to sit upon during visits and presentations by approved legal groups such as the National Immigrant Justice Coalition (NIJC).

It takes time to adjust to the lighting. In some areas, such as the control room which monitors even the smallest movement in each pod utilizing more than 180 cameras, the darkness is claustrophobic and the passage of time is blurred.

According to the guides, the average stay of a detainee at McHenry County is between 20-25 days. No one remains there longer than 364 days. Their level of housing varies upon need both in terms of security and based on the risk-assessment tool Lorenzen-Strait told Windy City Times was developed and in place at ICE facilities across the country by 2013.

Staff members engage in weekly classification meetings that review each inmate in the facility to address everything from medical concerns to mental health issues. A medical staff is on hand 24 hours per day, seven days per week with both a doctor and psychologist on-call any time they are required.

While the McHenry County facility also houses individuals accused of a crime and those with a sentence under one-year, it dedicates entire blocks to ICE detainees. They are separated by gender and those needing direct supervision (where staff are on the prison floor at all times) or indirect supervision monitored from a control station situated above each pod. In this unit, interaction with prison staff is via intercom.

Located on the third floor, Block Three contains six housing units, each with the capacity for six inmates sharing double bunks in cells that open out to a small, triangular day-room furnished with a television, tables, a payphone and a small selection of games and books. A few female detainees could be seen sat at the tables finishing up their lunches or playing cards together. Although their conversations could not be heard, their mannerisms indicated that they were interacting well with each other or minding their own business fixated on the television high above their heads.

Life in the facility is one framed by a rigid schedule. Detainees are awoken at 6 a.m. At 9 a.m., their cells are inspected for cleanliness, a made bed and removal of trash. They then have a choice to spend the next couple of hours in their cells or in the day room. Lunch is served for one hour beginning at 11 a.m. From 2 p.m.-2:30 p.m., they are ordered back in their cells for a mandatory lock-down. The same lockdown occurs after the 4 p.m. dinner hour. By 10 p.m., they are in their cells for the rest of the night.

To break the monotony and with good behavior, detainees can engage in a voluntary work program earning \$3 per day in, for example, the laundry or food preparation area carefully portioning out meals on compact plastic trays.

The facility has a library, barber shop and a clinic which serves as both a medical and psychiatric examination area and pharmacy. ICE representatives said they pay for all HIV medication administered along with hormone replacement therapy for transgender detainees.

Windy City Times was invited to take a closer look at an empty day room. Information posted on the walls provides commissary items available for purchase as well as “know your rights” and medical services information sheets. There are telephone numbers displayed which provide the detainee access to voicemail left by family members or to the ICE hotline. Secured laptop computers are lent to those detainees in search of legal information. Signs read “ICE has zero tolerance for sexual abuse and assault” and “Don’t Let Go of Hope.”

In order to provide some measure of that hope, Sisters JoAnn Persch and Pat Murphy along with volunteer teams from the Sisters of Mercy are permitted one-on-one visits with detainees. “We call it ‘pastoral care’ but it’s really listening to what’s in their heart and seeing if there’s some way we can respond,” Persch explained.

The sisters will also add money into a detainee’s commissary account. “A lot of them don’t have money,” Persch said. “So I am given the commissary list and I write an individual check for each [detainee]. If they have \$10 or less in their account we give them a \$10 check and that enables them to make a phone call, purchase sanitary products or food. We give away around \$500-\$800 per week.”

In the women’s unit, one detainee usually sets herself up as the mother figure to each of the others. Despite her non-sanctioned authority, fights sometimes break out and staff members respond to these incidents within seconds. Each detainee has an ID card containing a photo and disciplinary history which staff members commit to memory. The facility has an emergency response unit. Team members are equipped with a camera and trained in hostage negotiation. They often know to expect a problem long before it occurs thanks to the facility’s own central intelligence network. The overall goal is the avoidance of confrontation and to stop problems before they escalate. Windy City Times was told that nine-times-out-of-10, a detainee can be talked down before a situation becomes violent.

Those punished by administrative segregation (ad seg.) remain in one-person cells in the Special Management Unit (SMU) for 23 hours per day. Staff members check on them every 30 minutes. The maximum amount of time they can spend in ad seg is 15 days. A narrow open area in front of the cells is equipped with a box for those held inside to register a complaint during their brief respite from confinement. ICE stated that they view these complaints with the highest sense of importance and urgency and any allegations against staff members are investigated immediately.

However interaction between detainees and staff is not always confrontational or even impersonal. Many of the men gathered in the substantial day rooms located on the floor of the direct supervised Block Five were enjoying a soccer game on television alongside their guards and, at one point, appeared to joke around with them. Windy City Times was told that staff members have been known to organize chess tournaments and other competitions. Meanwhile, detainees help each other out with advice or legal research.

For those held in the McHenry County facility, information becomes their most treasured commodity. Their questions range from “what if I get married?” to “when am I leaving?”

Detainees at the small ICE facility located in Broadview, Illinois already have the answer to one of those questions. Their time inside its walls and within the borders of the United States can be measured in hours.

Even before Persch, Murphy and their volunteers set up the microphone on the sidewalk in front of the building, a small line of family members had formed in front of the glass doors. Mothers kept a tight hold of their children and the single suitcase or bag they are permitted to deliver to their loved one inside.

Once the family members enter, the suitcase is thoroughly checked for electronics or other contraband. After it is repacked, a brief and final visit is permitted with the detainee. It takes place through a doorway. There, the family members can hand over the suitcase or money if they have it. They are allowed only a few minutes to say their goodbyes.

The assembled group at the vigil recited Hail Mary over and over again, sang hymns and solemnly read the names of those people about to be deported. “We pray for families who have experienced the devastation of raids and deportations,” Persch said. “For the children who have lost parents, for the husbands and wives who are left alone to take care of their families and for all undocumented people who experience fear and live in a state of uncertainty.”

As she spoke, family members and friends were seen exiting the glass doors with tears streaming down their cheeks. They got in their cars and drove away, just as an ominous-looking bus with its windows completely blocked-out passed them and began to enter the opening garage.

The vigil was over in 40 minutes. Persch was then allowed to join the detainees shackled on the bus. Separated from them by plexiglass, she prayed for them and offered a message of hope through a small opening—it was a message gratefully received.

“I’m just devastated by the time I leave here,” she said. “But these people give me strength by the strength they have shown through their entire ordeal.”

“I know a lot of folks have called for the reform of immigration laws, but whatever the law that is currently in place we have to execute it,” ICE’s Lorenzen-Strait said. “I want to ensure that, if there is a reason why we have to detain someone, we give care and treatment to the best of our ability. We can work in lock-step with partners in the external world—LGBT advocates, attorneys and concerned citizens to make improvements together to try to make the world a better place.”

Rep. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.) believes that world can only be improved with comprehensive immigration reform and a complete overhaul of ICE’s methods. Among his long list of efforts, in June he sought amendments designed to stem abuse in detention centers and put an end to the 34,000 detainee-per-day mandate.

“I learned a long time ago that you need multiple reasons to get people to do the right thing,” he told Windy City Times. “So if people could care less about what happens to detainees, they will care that we are spending far more money to keep them in a detention bed rather than in a more humane and practical way, if we’re going to detain them at all.”

While President Obama’s Nov. 20, 2014 executive action offered some relief for undocumented immigrants, founder of the Perrom Law Office Roberto Romero-Perez maintains that it does not go far enough in its protections for LGBTQ immigrants. Of particular concern are those initiatives that deal with the expansion of provisional waivers of unlawful presence to include the spouses and sons and daughters of lawful permanent residents and the sons and daughters of U.S. citizens along with the ability of parents of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents who have been present in the country since Jan. 1, 2010, to request deferred action and employment authorization for three years.

“Only a small percentage of the LGBTQ community has been allowed to form relationships,” he told Windy City Times, “and that’s only been in the last couple of years. It’s a step in the right direction but it’s still disappointing.”

“The executive order didn’t go far enough to protect individuals,” Immigration Attorney Michael R. Jarecki agreed, “to respect the dignity of an individual who does not have the hook of a child or other family members here. We’ve seen that DREAMers and a lot of people who have qualified for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) are part of the LGBTQ community but there are other individuals who are not part of

DACA who will not be covered by this action. I think it is unfortunate because there's the authority and the need to do that. At the same time, I can't put my entire disappointment on the president because he was doing something that the Republican-controlled House of Representatives refused to even entertain."

Nevertheless, Republicans have pledged an all-out assault on the reforms now that they have assumed control of the entire Congress. In his interview with Windy City Times, Quigley sounded prophetic.

"My sense is that the far-right needs as many opportunities as they can to show that they're tough on this issue," he said. "That they're going to jail these people, kick them out and send them back where they came from. It's that harsh but they don't care. Many policy issues are complicated and sensitive. The nuance gets lost in the emotions of the time. I also think that there is a group of elected officials who prey upon people's worst fears, create scapegoats and pit one group against another. So, to paraphrase, what they're saying is 'America's a great country and our problems aren't because of you or the people who look like you. The people who are different and come from different areas are the reason there are problems.' The nuance says just the opposite; that immigration reform would dramatically grow our economy and reduce the national debt."

Quigley believes a vast majority of Americans support immigration reform. "When people in my district come back and say 'why isn't it happening?' it's because it's the tip of the dog's tail wagging the body-politic that preys on people's worst views of others and using that to scare them. It's the most abusive part of politics that exists today."

For more information about the Broadview Interfaith Vigil, visit www.crln.org/node/1469.

For more information on the Sisters of Mercy, visit www.sistersofmercy.org/.

Windy City Times would like to thank Michael R. Jarecki, Roberto Romero-Perez, Julio Rodriguez, Dennis Akpona, the National Immigrant Justice Coalition, the Sisters of Mercy, Immigration Customs Enforcement, Lieutenant Michael R. Lukas and the staff of the McHenry County Adult Correctional Facility for their invaluable assistance in this report.

For other parts of this series, see the following links:

LGBT immigrants still face hurdles, part one of series. windycitytimes.com/lgbt/LGBT-immigrants-still-face-hurdles-Part-one-/50226.html.

Immigration and LGBTQs: Immigrants tell their stories, part two of series.

windycitytimes.com/lgbt/Immigration-and-LGBTQs-Immigrants-tell-their-stories/50272.html.

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