

Testimony of Ramona Benitez, former staff in Child Detention Center
"This is legalized kidnapping and extortion"

There are over 100 prisons for immigrant children scattered around the country. They are contracted out by the federal government to social service agencies. They are officially called "shelters" but they are lock-ups. I know all this because I spent several years working inside one of these facilities operated by Heartland Alliance in Chicago. In my job I had clearance to information about the local detention centers in Chicagoland, as well as to the national portal of the child detention network, where I was exposed to the big picture of how this system operates: how children are apprehended, transferred between facilities, processed, how families are investigated, how the information on families is shared with ICE, how children are detained and what are the conditions for their so-called "release." I spent years interviewing hundreds of children, hearing their detailed stories, as well as interviewing their parents or adult family members. I also carefully reviewed the case files of hundreds more children and separated families. I am writing this testimonio to expose the operations of this entire system, and to expose the Heartland Alliance, Maryville Academy in Des Plaines and the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago for profiting off the incarceration of migrant children.

All the official language used to describe the apprehension, detention and processing of these children is misleading: it is meant to give the impression that these children were lost from families, that they have no families or communities in the US ready to receive them, and that they require the intervention of state agencies to "rescue", "care" for them, offer them "shelter" and reunite them with families. This is false. Majority of these children have communities and family members trying desperately to reunite with them, but the US government has found a way to sabotage their efforts and detain them unnecessarily, and I can tell you exactly why and how.

1. Abandonment, Separation and Abduction

When they are apprehended by DHS agents, children who are not able to prove legal status and who are not with their parent or adult guardian at the time are categorized as "Unaccompanied Alien Children". The Homeland Security Act regulates the detention and prosecution of these children. There is also the so-called Flores Agreement, which originated from a lawsuit against the federal government for the terrible conditions in detention facilities run by immigration enforcement agencies. This lawsuit was not won. It resulted in a settlement and in the rebranding of child detention as "care." When Department of Homeland Security labels these children "unaccompanied," they are arrested and placed under deportation proceedings; they are placed in the custody of Health and Human Services (and the subagency Office of Refugee Resettlement) and transferred to detention centers around the country operated by social service agencies – sometimes being shuffled for months between facilities. Part of the "care" offered by the social service agencies is to initiate a process that is officially called "family reunification."

My job was called "Family Reunification Specialist." In reality, I was tasked with investigating these children and their families. Once they were transferred to the custody of ORR and brought into the detention facility where I worked, I asked the children a set of questions about their home country, their journey here, etc. I would then separately ask the parent the same set of questions in order to verify if the stories "match." Most of the children I spoke with told me their journey was their only way to reunite with parents or family members who had already crossed into the US. The parents told stories of fleeing poverty, hunger, violence or other forms of instability, and of being forced to leave the child behind because they could only cross under life-threatening conditions. Unable to travel back to home country or to petition for their child to travel through legal means, parents were forced to hire coyotes or other people in order to be reunited with their children. These families narrate the ways they were ripped apart by US border policy that made crossing with their child a risk of death – by immigration policies that denied them status and basic parental rights. They narrate the extreme forms of violence they face in their desperate attempts to reunite. The children I interviewed knew exactly where their parents or loved ones were at the time they were picked up by the Department of Homeland Security. In fact, they were apprehended as they were desperately trying to reunify with their families. The children cross the border with names, phone numbers and addresses of their families in their pockets; those who are old enough to speak have phone numbers and names memorized.

However, when these children are apprehended, they are NOT reunited with their families right away. Instead, by policy, the US government prioritizes investigating and prosecuting these children first. This means the children are detained, placed under deportation proceedings/immigration prosecution (which means they are issued an Order to Appear), and incarcerated in undisclosed locations around the country where they remain isolated from family and loved ones. While they are incarcerated, they are investigated, and they are used as leverage, as hostages, to carry out investigations of family members

seeking their release. In most cases this process takes many months. At the end of the process, the children are still not free: when they are finally "released," they remain under deportation proceedings, which means they have follow-up court dates and have to endure the long, slow process of fighting their deportation cases.

2. How It Works: a Legalized Kidnapping

I worked at a detention center run by the Heartland Alliance in Chicago. My official title was "Family Reunification (FR) specialist." What they call "family reunification," I call prosecution, kidnapping, extortion. In my experience as an FR specialist, the intervention of state agencies and social service agencies functions as a legalized kidnapping. Let me explain exactly how this happens.

Children would arrive at the center where I worked in cars or vans, accompanied by ICE agents. They have already been placed under deportation proceedings, and their NTA paperwork (Notice to Appear) is transferred along with them. They were given an "orientation" to where they are and how the process is supposed to work. The children arrive hungry, exhausted, confused and frightened. Many are too young to understand what is happening or do not speak the same languages as the staff – either the case managers, clinicians or FR staff.

Their initial "processing," which begins with the intake and orientation, is deeply dehumanizing. After their orientation they are given forms to sign to indicate that they understand – the little ones put an "x" on the line. My job began with the intake interview; this is usually when the children would give me the phone numbers of adult loved ones. However, the intake procedure made it so I would not be able to immediately call parents – instead, I was also required to monitor or supervise these new arrivals in their first few hours of being introduced to the disciplinary regime of the detention center. Given the bureaucratic complexity of the paperwork, and how complicated it is to get groups of children lined up, fed, taught not to speak with each other, assigned to beds, integrated into a controlled routine etc., I was never able to start making phone calls right away. Procedure required I make a first phone call to family within the first 72 hours of the child's intake interview.

The children tell their stories, but all staff are suspicious of them since arrival. They are treated as guilty until proven innocent. Everything that they say is potentially a lie, everything needs to be verified – from "that's my mom" to "this is where I am from," "this is how my journey was, this is to whom I am going." All the info the children report is not trusted; it is received with suspicion and must be investigated to be confirmed. The official language calls their parents, family members or loved ones "potential sponsors." So, I had to interview the child to extract their story of how they got there, where they are from, what is their life in home country like, as much detail as possible. Then I would call the loved one to begin investigating their story. I was not allowed to reveal where I was calling from; I was supposed to interrogate the family member to see if their story matches the child's story, then request documents and biometric data to prove identity and age, etc. *Once you provide all this, we might move forward without looking at you with suspicion.* Everyone is automatically seen as a criminal on arrival.

Here is the general script I used as an FR calling the family.

Hello, my name is (first name only). I am calling to ask if you have a child whose name is X?

Most often families would respond with hesitation or fear, they might ask – who do you work for? I would offer reassurance but no concrete information: *we have a child, he is well and not in danger. He gave me your name and number. I want to confirm that you are indeed the parent.*

Parents sometimes hesitate and ask for more info: where? Can I speak with my child? It is a well-known scenario in the migrant community: when you are forced to make arrangements for illegal crossing, loved ones are often kidnapped while under the "care" of coyote networks, and at times even by the very people you hired. Families often receive these very types of calls from kidnappers requesting ransom. You need to provide information or money; you cannot speak with your loved one; we have them but cannot tell you where they are.

FR policies stated I was to offer reassurance but no information, no details and no direct contact with loved ones initially – parents must first cooperate and only then can they have some phone contact with their child. *He is fine. I cannot tell you where he is. You cannot speak with him. But if you answer my questions, if you cooperate, I will help you get your child back.* During the entire process of so-called family reunification, the state – via proxy social service agencies – operates in effect very much like a kidnapping entity. Families are never told where their children are; they cannot just come on visiting day, there is no visiting day – they cannot call their child. Instead, they are coerced to turn over all kinds of information and documents. As an FR specialist, I was the lead investigator, and all the information I extracted about the child and their family I would input into a federal portal to which DHS

and ICE have full access; the information collected by these social service agencies is directly shared with ICE. In fact, ICE agents cooperate directly with the centers, have regular meetings or visits and come to the centers to re-issue NTA (notice to Appear) paperwork. Centers conduct tests to verify the ages of older teens and if their age is "redetermined" to be 18 or older they transfer these cases to ICE. Children who turn 18 while detained are considered to "age out" of the program and are hand over to ICE.

Program compliance oversight is done by General Dynamics Information Technology (GDIT), one of the worlds largest private military contractors. A GDIT representative comes into the center weekly to review all cases and remand the ones they thins are not appropriate. After GDIT approves cases they are sent to ORR field office for review.

Children are coerced to accept medical procedures, forms of mandated "education," etc. When and if release of the child is finally approved, families are called and told *you can get your child if you pay for the plane ticket first for your child and one of our staff as an adult escort*. And these tickets are incredibly expensive, between \$450 and \$750 each. In my experience, most children would be traveling to families in the Southwest, not far from where they were apprehended, and many of the families I worked with ended up having to pay around \$1,200 for one child and an escort, as much as \$1,700 for two children with escort. As staff we knew some of the directors routinely made themselves the escorts when the destinations were desirable vacation spots; in particular two directors, Ricardo Jonas and Thom Perry would routinely book themselves as escorts for the Florida and California flights, and enjoy a few extra days of vacation on airline tickets paid for by the families of detained children by Heartland. This was the subject of a labor complaint submitted to the employees union and was talked about at union meetings, so all the staff were fully aware of this.

Agencies talk of "family reunification" and "release" – instead, the children will first be processed, and the families will be investigated. The families' reunification efforts are sabotaged . *Ok you will get your kids now, but you will get them in this way – they will not just come to you, we will process them first. We will detain and process them – and while detained, they are subject to indoctrination, brainwashing; they are under surveillance; we are extracting profit from them, processing them to collect information on their entire family network, and subject them to deportation prosecution. And then as a final demand you must pay the airfare.*

The ongoing violence does not end at release; after release the long slow process of deportation continues. This is has happened to hundreds of thousands of children over the past two decades. It becomes a long-term control over populations.

In order to recommend the release of a child to their family member, case workers must assemble a case file that fulfills hundreds of criteria, and the criteria themselves are often changing. This process is a bureaucratic nightmare. The child's wellbeing is sacrificed in order to ensure bureaucratic compliance. Many factors prolong the detention of children – missing documents, instances of mismatch like birth certificates missing a last name, typos in documents, etc. These problems take many months to resolve and as the duration and uncertainty of the incarceration continue the children begin to fall apart.

I learned that this crazy process is also absurdly discretionary. Children who get prioritized can get out sooner – because of age, because of media (ie attorneys got involved and provides some kind of incentive) or because the federal agencies decide to at times "expedite" the procedure. There is discretion up and down the power ladder here. When they say they are doing this for the safety of the children I do not believe them because I have seen how many times these rules change at the discretion of the authorities to skip this confirmation or that document, to expedite things along and so on.

3. Incarceration

While in detention the children are subjected to an extremely regimented daily routine. Wake-up time, going to wash teeth, eating, etc. – the schedule regulates their time down to 15 minute intervals. Children are not able to stray from this schedule; they are not able to stay in their rooms or rest during activity time, to sleep past 6 a.m. on weekdays, to opt out of activities or playtime, to rest when they need to, etc. An example: wake up, line up, shower – there is less than 5 minutes allotted for the morning shower -- line up again, clean rooms; line up again, and go quietly in hallway towards dining room in a straight line. In the dining room children are not allowed to speak from one table to the next; they have assigned seats and must sit quietly at all times. Line up to get the food, then line up to return to rooms. This is followed by class time or group time; line up again; between activities, go to

room for a few minutes, then line up for next activity or class. Outdoor times is scheduled, restricted and strictly monitored; there is one session of outdoor time per floor.

Children are allowed 20 minutes of phone time per week; they can split it in 2x10 min calls or use it at once. But they do not know when this time will be, and they cannot request to make a phone call at particular times, instead this is at the mercy of staff. Parents cannot call them ever. Food is rationed – what they eat and when they eat is strictly controlled. Children cannot eat away from authorized eating times and locations. Children who save a bit of food in their pockets or their rooms are disciplined for "hoarding". This is absurd as many of these children have learned that saving food for later is a valuable survival tool. They are dressed in a type of uniform: jeans and collared t-shirts. They are given necessities – plastic bottles, toothbrushes. These break, and they don't want to replace or give another because they already got one. Children get scolded if they lose or break any of these items. Not following directions, not complying, verbal issues, physical issues, threats of running away, crying, etc. all warrant a "write-up" and other forms of disciplining. For repeated or more serious issues of behavior, staff decide if they will transfer them to somewhere else.

The little ones would act out. If not quickly addressed, if they could not calm down right away, they would hit themselves. The children are sad, cry, they don't understand rules. "I don't want to be here, I wish I was dead," etc. This leads to medication being prescribed. Small things escalate – observation logs are made on the "problem kids." If kids continue with what is called "problem behavior," they see the psychiatrist and get medicated. Children who are seen as having "disciplinary problems" become more heavily monitored. A "special incident report (SIR)" is issued, and this can have grave consequences such as delaying the child's case and even transferring the child to a more "secure" facility. Monitoring means more surveillance: mandatory one-to-one logs (one staff to one child, until a clinician decides it's not necessary) – if they are sleeping, a staff is at the door looking at them – following them in all activities.

Clinicians screen for trauma only in terms of experiences of violence in home country and en route, for which they always issue an SIR. In most cases, there is no acknowledgement that this type of detention and processing is, itself, traumatizing. However when children "act out" or begin to hurt themselves, clinicians and case managers **must** do an SIR report. There were almost as many SIR reports issued because of issues while detained as there were about past traumas suffered by children in home country or en route. Children often clearly state the reasons for their behavior is they do not want to be here anymore and want to be with parents. Still, in most cases the assumption is that the detention itself is not a stressor, that is only mentioned when the children fall apart or "act out" and therefore clinicians are sometimes forced to note that the uncertainty and detention is a stressor on the child, and in some cases they are forced to recommend expediting the case because the mental health of the child is put at risk. But in most cases the deteriorating mental state of the child prolongs their case further as they are required to undergo more screenings, interviews etc.

Physical behaviors like fighting or non-cooperation, refusal to participate in activities, "acting out" or trying to run away can lead to transfer to "staff secure facility." There is a Memorandum of Agreement with anti-gang police taskforces, so the surveillance on these children can follow them when they are released to family in certain jurisdictions.

"I just want to go home" – the logic that dominates in these facilities makes this statement strange and crazy, while normalizing the captivity as somehow being done for the child's wellbeing. Under conditions of incarceration and uncertainty, any acting out is normal – it seems perfectly normal that a child should refuse to play, or refuse to eat unless they can see their Mom. What is cast as pathological or criminal, in need of correction and disciplining, is actually perfectly normal. All of them should be acting out – in a sense, these children have been abandoned by US immigration policy and by a society that is ready to accept their incarceration as somehow being in their interest. They are not just "acting out": they are resisting. This includes routinely refusing food, which the staff sometimes joke as being "hunger strikes."

4. Assimilation and Indoctrination

Staff fill our daily logs of how many hours children perform on different mandated activities such as education time, vocational training, life skills etc every single day. Children have to be engaged in 6 hours of mandatory class time per day plus other activities; together, these constitute learning time. Children are also put to work – washing dishes, throwing out garbage, cleaning, scrubbing bathroom floors and shower stalls, helping to serve food at mealtime. These "daily chores" can count as credits for activity time as either Vocational Training or Life Skills.

The education curriculum focuses on teaching children how to celebrate US official holidays, lessons on how to understand and appreciate official and highly nationalistic ideas about culture -- lessons on the so-called history of Memorial Day, activities for "Turkey Day" that involve drawing turkeys, and for independence day learning how to draw flags. The education mandated has nothing to do with education they received in home country. It is not affirming of the education of the world, of their own life experiences, their own cultural traditions. "This is good for you, this is what we do here," this is "age-appropriate." This forced institutionalization and indoctrination is a very colonial attitude.

Children are expected to be cheerful during lessons, as education methods supposedly require their active and enthusiastic participation. The education is in English. Central American children are addressed in Spanish even though many are indigenous and do not speak Spanish; many kids from Honduras and Guatemala who are from outside of the urban centers are all Indigenous. They do not speak Spanish, they speak Ixil, Mam, or K'itche. They are de-indigenized in these centers.

Some of these kids are not here to be going to school. They are older teenagers who are here to work because they have responsibilities for family in home country. Some are teen parents.

Kids are pretending to be learning and going along with the farce because they are told if they do not cooperate it can delay their release. Staff also know this is fake -- the curriculum, hand-outs, etc. are all fake.

5. Medical Procedures Without Consent

They say "we are doing this to you and for you." But this abducted population is coerced; they cannot consent to the medical procedures that become performed while they are held captive. What is labeled as health services is actually a series of mandated medical procedures that the children and families did not ask for and did not consent to, like mandatory 10 shots and medical tests for parasites, vaccinations and other preemptive "public health" mandates, screenings etc. In many cases these screenings give false positives -- for instance staff are aware that children from certain countries always have a false positive on the TB test because the vaccines they receive in home country reacts to the TB test. A false positive leads to unnecessary follow-up procedures like XRays, which further delays their case and prolongs their time in detention.

The little ones put up a fight when they are taken to get the shots; older kids ask, "what is this test?" and try to explicitly and verbally deny consent. They are told that if they do not consent they will not be released. Is it the children who are coming here seeking medical help? When they do complain of feeling ill and needing medical care, it is hard for them to receive it; it involves waiting, being postponed, lack of resources for that. They have to insist and ask, go into fever, etc. -- only then they can see a doctor. If chronic medical issues are determined (bronchitis for example), it is treated -- but no free follow up medical services are provided once leaving custody). Dental services includes forensic dental work to test for age. The children are not told these tests are performed on them, they do not consent.

All medical procedures are performed with no consent -- the parent in the US, who the FR is in contact with, is also not called for permission or consent for medical procedures. The permission is granted by ORR who are considered to hold guardianship at this time. When children come in, ORR permission is printed and signed by the staff which grants permission for medical services to be performed.

Heartland boasts of offering mental health services: this is perhaps the most terrible and cruel thing of all. The clinicians give handouts, kids sign that they met with a clinician and we are done. That's all the treatment they get. BUT children has to recount experiences of trauma for staff in order to fill out paperwork on their case; children are required to answer questions about violence in family, memories and experiences of trauma which they must recount repeatedly to strangers who are not invested in their long term health care. This is not mental health care, it is traumatizing and dangerous. All the workers want is to fill the paperwork, not to treat the child, and the child is made to pay as the traumatic stories are extracted from them for the benefit of compliance, so the agency can say they gave a "service" and justify the funding they received.

The children are supposed to get legal services. There is a "know your rights" workshop offered by a lawyer or paralegal, I'm not sure exactly what their job title is, but it is always someone from the National Immigrant Justice Center. They come and give a presentation to the children, to 4 and 5 and 8 year-olds, then hand them a form that says they received a "know your rights" training. Children put an "x" on the mark and the nonprofit gets to say they offered a "service." For everything, they have to sign a form to say they received a service. Everyone is assembling paperwork at the expense of the children.

The workers and teachers don't even believe in any of it anymore; even the ones who come in with good intentions or who at first believe they are helping children. After a while you know it's a farce. Staff understand that this place is a mechanism for getting money, getting a paycheck. At the end of the day you just hope nobody runs away, nobody fights, and if at the end of the shift nobody has chopped anyone's head off then that's great, good enough. The day when you haven't had to restrain any child is a good day.

The teachers are always chatting and revealing their thoughts. Like, what can I do in 45 min to keep you busy and not acting out, keep quiet, let's watch videos. Even those who believe it - I'm supposed to teach, I'm supposed to provide counseling -- they know after a while this is a front for detention. Those who insist that this is an organization that cares for children are the higher-ups along the corporate ladder; the managers, directors, etc. They push the sales pitch; they get huge salaries, are politically connected, and many of the lower staff resent them. Heartland's top CEO made over \$400,000 per year in salary. The higher-ups are trying to secure their own financial interest, the image of the organization and program.

6. Children Resist

Kids go on hunger strike - they don't have the language for this, but they refuse food *often*. This freaks the staff out. Clinicians and physicians get involved. Staff also puts up a fight. They offer food during designated time only then that's it; they will only offer again at next mealtime. They are trained in how to manage the child without giving in to their demands or their protest. They are trained in how to restrain children and often must do so.

Children talk with other children they are not allowed to; they share contact info of their family members so they can stay in touch after detention ends; this is forbidden and they get a write-up and SIR is issued just because they are caught trying to communicate with each other outside of the rules.]

Kids refuse to leave rooms, refuse to go out for "play time", refuse to be cheerful. Some try to run away, and there is an AWOL procedure: immediate response is staff tries to apprehend them, then police is called. Attempts to escape mean increased surveillance on them: their outings are limited; they are checked for extra clothes; they might get transferred out to more secure facilities if they do not repent.

There are also 3 month follow-up calls supposedly to check on their wellbeing - but this is really to monitor them, because when they are released the children remain under deportation proceedings and have follow-up court dates but more than half of the kids do not show up for their court dates, so this is seen as a problem for the government's efforts to deport them. The families try to resist by not offering their information or biometrics (while I worked there we had to ask for biometrics and documents for extended family, information about entire household, workplace and social circle, sometimes home visits were required). Immigrant communities are resisting by swiping left for the follow-up calls. People do not want the follow-up calls because they do not get services. They want to stay away from Heartland Alliance because they know they work for the government. These facilities are not there to work for the children and families - they are there to do the dirty work of the US government in tracking, monitoring and making families available for deportation.