

Lawmakers press for fingerprinting of detention camp staff

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The Trump administration announced in June 2018 that it would open the temporary shelter for up to 360 migrant children in this isolated corner of the Texas desert. The facility has expanded into a detention camp holding thousands of teenagers.

In this Nov. 15, 2018 photo protesters talk to a guard inside the Tornillo detention camp holding more than 2,300 migrant teens in Tornillo, Texas. (Ivan Pierre Aguirre via AP)

As lawmakers called Thursday for stricter background checks and a public hearing to further investigate problems at a massive detention camp for migrant teens, the agency responsible for the shelter said it could take as long as a month to complete FBI fingerprint scans for the 2,100 staffers working there.

More than 2,300 teens are being held at the remote tent city in Tornillo, Texas, which opened in June as a temporary, emergency shelter. It now appears to be becoming more permanent, with ongoing construction at costs that can reach \$1,200 per child per day, The Associated Press reported Tuesday.

The Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General on Tuesday raised concerns that the private contractor running Tornillo has not put its staff through FBI background checks, and that they're allowed to have just one mental health clinician for every 100 children.

HHS spokesman Mark Weber told AP Thursday it was working to complete the FBI fingerprint scans within a month.

"These issues must be addressed and remedied without delay," Rep. Jerrold Nadler, a New York Democrat, said in a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar. It was co-signed by other Democratic House members. They asked for a briefing before Dec. 11 and a hearing in the new Congress early next year.

In this Nov. 15, 2018 photo students from a local Catholic school protest outside the Tornillo detention camp holding more than 2,300 migrant teens in Tornillo, Texas. (Ivan Pierre Aguirre via AP)

"Similar to building a wall from sea to shining sea, detaining kids in Tornillo is the most expensive and least effective policy approach that fails to address root causes of migration flows or make anyone safer," said Rep. Will Hurd, a Texas Republican whose district includes the detention camp.

Hurd and others said the current border crisis must be solved by working with Central American leaders.

The IG memo, which put the detention camp under a national spotlight, detailed how the former director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement Scott Lloyd granted the contractor running Tornillo, San Antonio-based BCFS Health and Human Services, a waiver in June to staff up without typically required child abuse and neglect checks.

Those checks can raise a red flag about any job candidate with a record of hurting a child. There were two reasons for the waiver, according to the inspector general: first, the agency was under pressure to open the detention camp quickly, and second, Lloyd's agency assumed Tornillo staff had already undergone FBI fingerprint checks. They had not.

BCFS has filed more than 30 reports on "significant incidents" from Tornillo.

Texas Republican Sen. John Cornyn said the detained teens must be kept safe.

In this Nov. 15, 2018 photo provided by Ivan Pierre Aguirre, migrant teens are led in a line inside the Tornillo detention camp holding more than 2,300 migrant teens in Tornillo, Texas. (Ivan Pierre Aguirre via AP)

"We don't want anybody staffing those facilities who are going to be a potential danger to the population housed there," Cornyn said.

AP found that federal plans to close Tornillo by Dec. 31 may be nearly impossible to meet. A contract obtained by AP shows the project could continue into 2020 and planned closures have already been extended three times since last summer. More than 1,300 teens have arrived at the tent city in the middle of the Texas desert since the end of October.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat, said he had been assured during a visit to Tornillo this summer that the teens were in safe care.

"These are children who are in our trust," he said. "The United States of America has a legal responsibility for the safety."

Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, said it was ironic the reason record numbers of migrant children are currently being detained is because stringent background checks on their family members have greatly slowed reunifications.

"Clearly, child safety is of no concern for this administration," he said. "The Trump administration's cruelty knows no bounds. It should immediately shut down the facility at Tornillo."

Sen. Tom Udall, a Democrat from New Mexico, said the AP report deepened the fears he held when he visited the facility earlier this year.

"This administration's inhumane policies and chaotic execution of those policies will leave lasting scars on the children who are being caught up in this disaster," Udall said. "The transparency and accountability of this agency is profoundly absent."

- AP