

Chairwoman Loretta Sanchez (D-CA)
Subcommittee on Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism
Committee on Homeland Security

Hearing on “Moving Toward More Effective Immigration Detention Management”

December 10, 2009

Opening Statement, as prepared

Today we are gathering to hear testimony from key stakeholders and advocates on the current immigration detention system and the challenges to reforming detention standards. This hearing comes at a crucial time since the Department of Homeland Security is currently considering how to overhaul the current system.

This past August Immigration and Customs Enforcement Assistant Secretary John Morton and Secretary Napolitano highlighted vast changes they plan to make to the immigration detention system.

As someone who has advocated for improved medical treatment at detention facilities, I was pleased that these changes are likely to include the hiring of health and medical experts as part of the new Office of Detention Policy and Planning.

As a follow up to this hearing, early next year we will conduct a second hearing to hear directly from ICE about their proposals and plan to improve the detention system.

As an advocate for improved and robust alternatives to detention programs for vulnerable populations and non-criminal aliens, I am interested to hear what today’s witnesses will suggest for such a program moving forward.

Since the enactment of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in 1996, immigrant detainees have reached an all time high of 33,400 people. This is an astonishing increase given that in 1996 the number was roughly 9,000, but not a surprise considering ICE’s single largest expenditure, over 800 million dollars is spent annually on detention bed acquisition.

I would like to hear from our panel of witnesses about what ideas they have to move beyond “bed acquisition” as a detention strategy.

Furthermore, ICE currently uses a web of detention facilities, ranging from contract detention facilities to the over 350 local and state facilities, along with government run facilities.

Unfortunately it seems like this variety of facilities has made it difficult to ensure that national detention standards are being adhered to in all detention facilities. I believe it is extremely important that any detention facility, acting on behalf of the United States, adhere to a clear and standard level of oversight and accountability.

With the opportunity to discuss these issues today, and the wide range of perspectives our panel represents, my hope is that we will hear about specific actions and policy changes that need to be taken to improve the operation of detention facilities. As we all know, the concerns and issues I have outlined today are just some of the many challenges we face in overhauling our detention system.

On a final note, it is important to recognize that of the thousands of detainees being held in our detention facilities, 58% of them have no known criminal history; however they are still held in expensive criminal detention facilities.