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## **Detainees Say Facility Denies Basic Care**

### **ICE Claims the L.A. Center Is Only A 'Staging Area'**

**By Sandra Hernandez**  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

**LOS ANGELES** - In the first week that federal immigration officials detained Hector Fuentes, the Honduran national said he went without his anti-seizure medication, a bed and a shower.

Like Fuentes, a dozen other immigrants also told the Daily Journal how they have spent days detained in a downtown Los Angeles federal building without access to medical care, showers, toothbrushes or beds.

#### **Los Angeles Street Building**

The allegations involve a temporary holding area inside a downtown Los Angeles Street federal building.

"I can't even brush my teeth," Fuentes said during a recent telephone interview. "I've slept on the floor for the past week. They don't even give you a blanket. You are just thrown in here, and they forget about you."

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials described the area, known as B-18, as a staging center used to process immigrants coming in and out of the agency's custody.

ICE officials said the basement area is "not a detention center," and "does not detain/hold individuals."

#### **'Standards Do Not Apply'**

"I'm told detention standards do not apply because it's not a detention center," said Virginia Kice, a spokeswoman for ICE.

But recent complaints paint a picture of an ad hoc detention facility, at times housing up to 100 men during the day and dozens of immigrants at night.

ICE has standards that apply to detention centers but none that affect staging centers.

Several detainees at the Los Angeles Street facility said they have been there for weeks, intermittently transferred for a few hours to nearby jails or a Lancaster facility and then returned to the staging area.

Kice said immigrants do not spend the night or remain at the facility for more than 12 hours - except in rare instances.

"Our goal is to ensure that no one is there for more than 12 hours," Kice said. "There are rare cases where people may have medical issues, and in rare instances, it may occur that they are there more than 12 hours."

Detainees provided a different account.

"They put up to 100 people in the tank during the day," said Eduardo Gonzalez, a Salvadoran national who agreed to his deportation in September but remains detained at the Los Angeles Street facility.

"They make us sleep, eat and go to the bathroom in the same room. And we have to sleep on the floor," Gonzalez said. "It smells terrible because so many of us haven't been able to take a shower."

Gonzalez has worn the same clothes for nearly 40 days, only washing his underwear twice when briefly transferred to a Pasadena jail, he said. "And even when they take you somewhere, you don't get much sleep because they don't give you a bed until around 1 a.m. and then get you up at 5 a.m." Gonzales said.

Aberlardo Chavez said he has spent up to 16 hours a day for the past five weeks in the downtown facility.

"Every night they take us to a different location, or they leave you here," Chavez said. "I've gone a week without a shower or brushing my teeth. I can't see a doctor."

None of the immigrants interviewed for this story had legal representation.

ICE officials refused comment on the specific allegations raised by detainees because the Daily Journal declined to provide detainees' names to the agency.

"Daily Journal readers should know [the newspaper] refused repeated requests by ICE to provide the names of the detainees portrayed in this story so we could determine if there was any merit to the allegations," Kice said in an e-mail. "ICE officers in the Los Angeles area interact with hundreds of individuals every day. We are committed to ensuring that

everyone in our custody is treated fairly and humanely. Should we fall short, we will take appropriate corrective action. Unfortunately, [the newspaper] furnished us with only generalization and insinuations in preparing the story."

Kice also said public health officials located inside the staging area provide medical screenings.

But several detainees said agents at the Los Angeles Street facility ignored their medical requests and medications were abruptly cut off.

"I've asked to see a doctor, but they just ignore you," Fuentes said, adding he had been unable to take Dilantin, an anti-seizure medication.

Medical experts said abrupt withdrawal of Dilantin can provoke life-threatening seizures.

"Going seven days without it is very dangerous because by now a patient has very little of the drug in his system, making him more susceptible to seizures," said Dr. Homer Venters, an internist with Bellevue/New York University's Center for Health and Human Rights.

Like Fuentes, Pulisio Jimenez, a Salvadoran national who is awaiting deportation, said he had not received asthma medication since arriving at the Los Angeles Street facility.

"I tell the agents I need medication, but they tell me I have to wait," Jimenez said, his words cut short by constant coughing.

Immigrant and civil rights groups called the allegations alarming and questioned why national detention standards are not enforced at the staging area.

"ICE can't create a black hole by calling the Los Angeles Street facility a staging area when in fact they have a de facto detention center," said Marisol Orihuela, an attorney working as a fellow with the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California.

Orihuela said she spoke with several detainees whose descriptions of the conditions were similar to those obtained by the Daily Journal.

"ICE is holding the immigrants during the day and taking them out for a few hours at night. ICE can't evade their responsibility to provide basic human rights, such as basic medical care or hygiene," she said.

Immigration attorneys called for an investigation of the Los Angeles facility and what standards should apply to any facility that detains immigrants, even for a few hours.

"If ICE is using 'staging grounds' to get around their own detention standards and warehousing detainees for long periods of time, it raises some extremely troubling questions," said David Leopold, a Cleveland immigration attorney and vice president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, a national trade group.

"ICE's own record of dealing with detainees over the past year has been abysmal," Leopold said. "We have seen people die in detention. This country cannot tolerate a gulag for immigrants."

Immigration officials increasingly have faced questions about conditions at detention facilities, including lax medical care following several deaths last year.

In July, a Department of Homeland Security inspector general's report recommended improved access to medical care. The report followed several high-profile detainee deaths, including that of Victoria Arellano, a Mexican AIDS patient who died two months after she was transferred to a San Pedro detention facility. Arellano's family and friends said medical staff at the detention center repeatedly denied the transgender immigrant the drugs that kept her alive.

Federal immigration officials repeatedly have said they spend millions annually on medical care for detained immigrants.

Unlike state or federal prisons, immigration detention standards are not legally binding.

The allegations over conditions at the staging center come amid ramped up enforcement of existing immigration laws leading to record numbers of arrests and deportations. Currently, an estimated 32,000 immigrants are held in a loose network of privately run centers, federally operated facilities and local jails.

In Southern California, stepped-up enforcement has left ICE officials scrambling to house detainees, especially those requiring medical care, Kice said.

"One of the challenges we are facing is the increased number of people with medical issues and finding a facility that can accommodate their needs," she said.

Among the largest facilities is the Mira Loma detention center in Lancaster, about an hour north of Los Angeles. Last year, ICE signed a contract to expand the number of detainees housed there. The facility is run by the Los Angeles County sheriff's department.

At present, about 800 detainees are housed at Mira Loma, far less than the 1,400 immigrants permitted under the new contract. However, the facility will not accept detainees with serious medical or criminal problems.

For Chavez, who has spent time at Mira Loma, the abrupt transfer to the Los Angeles Street processing center is difficult to understand.

Chavez said he was transferred after he suffered a broken rib.

"I thought I was going to get therapy, and then they transferred me here," Chavez said. "My back and ribs hurt and no one will give me any medication.

"I've asked to see a doctor but no one tells you anything here."

[sandra\\_hernandez@dailyjournal.com](mailto:sandra_hernandez@dailyjournal.com)

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