

## A Visit to the Northwest Detention Center by Mike Wold

In the invisible economy of undocumented workers, you'd think what happens when such immigrants get detained and deported would be very visible. But that's almost as invisible to the ordinary public as the rest of the invisible economy. An example is the Northwest Detention Center near downtown Tacoma, which is generally under the radar to the public. The privately-owned prison is on a dead-end street in the Tacoma tide flats, surrounded by warehouses and railroad tracks. There's not much traffic by here.

In March, a delegation from Westside's Social Justice Committee toured the center to see what goes on there. After walking through the gate and the front door, we found ourselves in a very small waiting area in front of a counter and a gate with metal detectors like you'd find at airports. We weren't allowed to bring in purses, pens, paper, electronic equipment, or wallets, including money or credit cards.

Well, this is a jail, you might say. Of course they're very careful. But this isn't, officially, a jail. The detainees are not serving prison sentences; and they're generally not charged with anything except for being in the country without proper immigration papers. They're simply waiting for the disposition of their cases. The facility is a "short-term" holding facility - unlike a "real" prison, there are few of the "amenities" that long-term facilities might have, such as exercise equipment; a proper library; job training; or opportunities for education. However, if detainees contest deportation, they can end up staying here for months or years.

What's the purpose of all the security? Most of the detainees are not a threat to anyone. The security exists to make sure that they stay put until ICE either releases them or deports them. Their imprisonment is not supposed to be punitive, although certainly almost anyone housed there would experience it as punishment.

Our tour took us past a visiting area. It's possible for families to visit detainees, assuming they have proper immigration status. They can talk to their loved one behind glass on a telephone. About a half-hour is provided for these visits, regardless of how far a family had to come to see a detainee. "Touch" visits, say between married couples, can occur only with special dispensation.

It's also possible for detainees to talk to lawyers. Because immigration violations are not criminal offenses, detainees are not eligible for public defenders. The only free legal advice is from the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP), which provides an orientation program (under federal contract) to all detainees. NWIRP directly represents a few detainees; however, the number of lawyers available is much smaller than the demand, so NWIRP limits the cases it takes to those that have a good chance of success. Most people who want to contest deportation have to mount their own legal cases. Nearly 90% are unrepresented in immigration court, a venue described by an immigration judge as "traffic court volumes with Supreme Court consequences." To marginally facilitate this, the detention center provides six or seven computers, available on a sign-up basis, to serve the 900 to 1500 inmates who are there at any one time. Under our current immigration laws, many have no legal basis to remain here and will ultimately be deported.

The detention center has a medical clinic and our guide claimed that the medical care there was better than most detainees get on the outside. We've heard conflicting reports about that. Be that as it may, we learned later that the main purpose of the clinic is to make sure that

detainees are healthy enough to be deported; long-term care, such as follow-up exams for cancer survivors, is not included.

The inmates are sorted into three categories of “risk,” the lowest risk wearing blue coveralls, the medium risk wearing orange, and the high risk inmates wearing red. Low and medium-risk inmates have an opportunity to work – at a rate of \$1 per day, the minimum set by Congress. The Geo Corporation, which owns and runs the center under contract to ICE, appears to make good use of this provision – we saw inmates working in the kitchen and the laundry, for example, as well as one acting as a barber.

Religious services take place in a barren multi-purpose room; there’s no sense of any spiritual tradition in the furnishings or on the walls and our tour guide was vague about which groups do religious services here, except for the Catholics. That made sense, since most of the detainees are from Latin America.

Unless they have specific business in the facility – working on a computer, seeing a doctor, working in the kitchen or the laundry, for example – detainees spend all their time in one of the “pods” in the facility, which are large dorm rooms with showers and tables and bunk beds, each housing sixty-four people. Unlike the rest of the facility, which seemed uncrowded and quiet, the pod we visited seemed quite crowded; we remarked that it would be hard to share sleeping quarters with so many people.

Meals are served in the pods. We were invited to sample the food, but declined. In the past, food quality has been an issue and there was an incident of widespread food poisoning a few years ago. I recently heard a report of a sit-down strike over food quality last year. Our tour guide was at pains to emphasize the good quality and quantity of the food, possibly because a report issued by OneAmerica a few years ago reported inmate complaints of insufficient food. Visitors are not allowed to bring food into the facility. Inmates may purchase supplemental food. Our tour guide said ramen noodles is one of the most popular items.

After the visit, we learned that the Tacoma Detention Center is one of the more pleasant of these facilities. It’s managed to attract a fair amount of attention from immigrant rights and human rights groups in the Northwest and there’s a regular vigil every second Saturday of the month. I’ve attended a couple of these vigils – and was surprised to see the guards drilling at the gate in riot gear with rifles. We didn’t see any guards doing that on our weekday tour; apparently, that’s just done for the benefit of the vigilers. In any case, the level of interest in the facility, including vigils, visits, and the One America report, is probably the reason that conditions at the facility are better than at those in many parts of the country. This doesn’t mean that things couldn’t be improved a great deal – but it’s the philosophy that created this center – which mandates that detainees will inevitably be deported unless and until they’re able to find a provision in the law that definitively allows otherwise – that really needs to change.

The Social Justice Committee has identified several ways that we could help detainees at the facility, including collecting books for the small library; sitting in on deportation hearings to help ensure that due process is followed; and visiting prisoners who have asked for someone to visit them. We’re currently looking for people who are interested in doing these things – if you’re interested, contact Mike Wold ([mikewold@drizzle.com](mailto:mikewold@drizzle.com)). How much we do depends on how much interest there is – so don’t wait until we get something started to volunteer!