

END DETENTION IN YOUR DISTRICT

STATE: Texas

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: 34

FACILITIES: Port Isabel; East Hidalgo Detention Center; Willacy Detention Center

CAPACITY: 2,957 (approx.)

Port Isabel Service Processing Center

This facility is owned by ICE and operated by private prison company Ahtna Technical Services, Incorporated (Ahtna Inc.). In 2008, Ahtna Inc. and ICE signed a [contract](#) to manage the Port Isabel Service Processing Center (Port Isabel) through 2013. An updated contract is not publicly available, but a 2012 [government solicitation](#) indicates that the contract could extend to 2022. According to a joint [report](#) by the Detention Watch Network (DWN) and the Center for Constitutional Rights, the guaranteed monthly minimum of people held in detention at Port Isabel is 800. As of [2017](#), approximately 1,160 men and women are detained in Port Isabel.



Credit: US Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Deaths in Detention

There have been four reported [deaths](#) at Port Isabel. On May 2009, Arnaldo Cruz Silva, a 59 year-old Cuban national, [died](#) of a cardiac arrest while in custody. In July 2013, Leslis Rodriguez, an Honduran national, [died](#) of an intracranial hemorrhage. According to the ICE [Death Review](#), Rodriguez had not received his hypertension medication for 45 days before he died. Carlos Funez Ochoa, a 30 year old Honduran immigrant [died](#) in April 2015 after being found unresponsive. Ronal Francisco Romero (identified by ICE as Ronald Cruz), a 39 year-old Honduran national, died of cardiac arrest in [May 2018](#). His [autopsy](#) concluded that he contracted bacterial meningitis while detained at Port Isabel and would have been noticeably ill and in severe pain before he died.

Recorded Abuses

2016 ERO [inspection](#) of Port Isabel reported two hunger strikes, six uses of immediate force on people in detention, and one death within the inspection period. Port Isabel is an adult detention facility; however, in 2017, ICE [detained](#) an underage immigrant in the facility. The teenage asylum seeker provided his birth certificate verifying his age, but ICE agents detained him in Port Isabel for four months before transferring him to another facility.

In February 2019, a 24 year old Honduran asylum seeker gave birth to a [stillborn child](#) after Port Isabel staff failed to transport her to the hospital in a timely manner. The woman, who was six months pregnant at the time, had [complained](#) of abdominal pain and told facility staff that labor was imminent. In March 2019, the Daily Beast [reported](#) that Noe de la Cruz, a 72 year old Mexican man diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, was not receiving treatment while detained in Port Isabel. The report suggests that the facility does not have the capacity to care for someone suffering from Alzheimer's.

Key Areas of Concern

- Medical neglect;
- Physical and sexual abuse
- Inadequate food
- Inappropriate use of solitary

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In 2018, the Intercept [reported](#) that the food served to immigrants in Port Isabel is insufficient in both quantity and quality. Their report also noted that hunger strikers are threatened with punitive solitary confinement, which is in direct violation of ICE's PBNDS 2011 standards. Hunger strikers are also subjected to forced hydration and forced feeding. According to the Brownsville Herald, ICE officials asked a federal court for an [order](#) to forcibly restrain, feed and hydrate five asylum seekers hunger striking in Port Isabel.

In 2018, ICE [announced](#) that Port Isabel is the primary family reunification and removal center for adults in their custody. However, advocates report that parents detained in Port Isabel are not provided with information to reunite with their [children](#), face communication [barriers](#), and are [pressured](#) by guards to drop their asylum claims in order to reunite with their children. A former Port Isabel guard named Tony Hefner [implicated](#) facility staff in multiple counts of sexual and physical abuse on immigrants in detention. Hefner worked in the facility for five years before Ahtna, Inc. began operating it. He [witnessed](#) staff members engage in physical, psychological, and sexual abuse on people in detention, including underage immigrants. Between 2009 and 2014, three guards faced [criminal charges](#) of either physical or sexual assault. Between 2013 and 2015, the Department of Homeland Security recorded [four complaints](#) of sexual abuse at Port Isabel. In 2014, a former guard named Israel Cortez verified that he witnessed the same abuses Hefner mentioned.

East Hidalgo Detention Center

The East Hidalgo Detention Center (East Hidalgo) is owned and operated by private prison company GEO Group. In 2009, the United States Marshals Service and the county signed an [Intergovernmental Service Agreement \(IGSA\)](#) to detain immigrants in the facility. In 2012, the [contract](#) was renewed without an explicit termination date. As of 2012, the [per diem rate](#) is \$59.25 per person. East Hidalgo has capacity to detain 200 immigrants, both male and female. As of 2016, there were 83 men and one woman in ICE detention in the facility. In [2018](#), the average daily population of immigrants detained was 78.

In a 2016 [inspection](#), the Office of Detention Oversight (ODO) found eight deficiencies in five standards at East Hidalgo. The deficiencies included: medical neglect, communication barriers, and issues with the facility handbook. The East Hidalgo Detention Center is not required to abide by the ICE Performance Based Detention Standards 2011 or the Sexual Abuse and Assault Prevention and Intervention standard.

Resources

- [Catholic Charities Diocese of Lubbock](#)
- [South Texas Immigration Council, Inc.](#)
- [South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project Texas](#)
- [Rio Grande Legal Aid](#)



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In December 2019, a 42 year old Mexican immigrant [died](#) in the East Hidalgo Detention Center. The cause of death is suspected to be suicide; however, the [case](#) is still under investigation.

In November 2019, five facility guards were [charged](#) with bribery and sexual abuse. Four guards accepted cash in return for distributing contraband to people in detention. The fifth guard sexually abused a man in detention whom they supervised. In December 2019, another East Hidalgo guard was [charged](#) with bribery.

Willacy Detention Center

This facility is owned and operated by the private prison company Management and Training Corporation (MTC). ICE and Willacy County signed an IGSA [in 2006](#). The agreement states that the per diem rate is \$78 per person and that the facility will follow NDS 2000. The agreement expired in 2008, and an updated one is not available. As of 2017, the Willacy Detention Center can detain [1,700](#) men and women. In 2011, the average [population](#) in ICE detention was 775. From 2006 until 2015, the facility had 10 Kevlar covered [tents](#) that housed 200 immigrants each.

In [June 2011](#), ICE ended the contract at Willacy after the facility failed to meet detention goals. At this time, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) began operating the detention center. The contract between MTC and the BOP [guaranteed](#) a minimum payment of \$48 million in 2015. The minimum payment was made regardless of the number of people in detention; however, the BOP paid MTC an additional per diem for detaining immigrants beyond 90 percent capacity.

In [February 2015](#), people in detention rioted to protest mistreatment from guards and substandard food. The riots [destroyed](#) the tents, causing the BOP to terminate the contract with MTC in March 2015. The termination of the contract caused the facility to shut down for two years. In [March 2017](#), Willacy County sold the facility to MTC. The new [agreement](#) will pay Willacy County \$3 per day for every person held in the detention center. At full capacity, the detention center would pay the county about \$1 million a year. In [June 2018](#), ICE, Willacy County, and MTC tentatively approved the agreement to detain immigrants in the facility again; however, that contract is not available.



Credit: US Immigration and Customs Enforcement

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In October 2012, a mental health coordinator, Twana Cooks-Allen, working in Willacy [reported](#) multiple firsthand accounts of sexual abuse from guards on people in detention. A former immigrant in detention, Donovan Jones, corroborated that guards often sexually harassed female immigrants. According to Jones, guards would trade contraband for sexual favors in blind spots of the facility. People in detention also noted that complaining about the abuse would adversely affect their immigration cases. Another former Willacy employee, Sigrid Adameit, described an instance in which she was instructed to expedite the deportation of a woman who complained that a guard raped her. Adameit [recalled](#) that the woman in detention was ordered to be deported while she was in the medical unit receiving a rape kit. Adameit also noted that the facility culture allowed the abuse to occur, and that guards were afraid to speak up for fear of termination. Cooks-Allen and Jones also reported that guards either ignored or destroyed any grievances that immigrants in detention filed. According to NPR, an ICE audit [showed](#) people in detention filed over 900 grievances in 2009, but only four were resolved. Cooks-Allen also reported that people in detention at Willacy were served food infested with maggots

.In the spring of 2009, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [ordered](#) investigative surveys to the entire Willacy population in order to learn more about the accusations of abuse. However, ICE took punitive action on immigrants who complained of abuse in the surveys, as people who made complaints were quickly deported. Jones noted that guards pressured him to withhold complaints about the conditions of the facility. In June 2009, the DHS met with Cooks-Allen, and opened 13 investigations of criminal misconduct at Willacy. Nine of those investigations involved sexual abuse, and one involved drug charges. In August 2011, one guard plead guilty of sexual abuse of a person in detention. The guard [continued](#) to work for Willacy for eight months after the abuse occurred.

In a 2014 [report](#), the ACLU detailed [complaints](#) of overcrowding, a lack of programming, inadequate medical care, and inappropriate use of solitary confinement. In each Kevlar tent, the 200 beds for immigrants were spaced three feet apart. The overcrowding led to multiple unsanitary conditions, including overflowing toilets. Multiple people in detention reported their requests for medical care were ignored by facility staff. Immigrants at Willacy were sent to solitary confinement not only as a punishment, but also due to lack of space in general housing areas. Immigrants kept in solitary were restricted to three showers per week and one phone call per month. According to the report, 300 people were in solitary confinement at any given time in Willacy.

In [May 2019](#), a clerk and a senior program director employed at Willacy were indicted for bribery after selling lists of people in detention to local immigration attorneys. The attorneys used the information to solicit clients.