

# Let's Be Clear: The Tornillo Center for Migrant Children is *NOT* a Prison

December 18, 2018

By Irwin Redlener

Last weekend a small, but powerful group of activists gathered at a Tornillo, Texas youth detention center to protest conditions for migrant teenagers waiting for reunification with families or official sponsors.

Joining the demonstration and facility site visit were Democratic members of Congress, including Representatives Beto O'Rourke (Texas) and Judy Chu (CA), Representative elect, Veronica Escobar (Texas) and Senators Jeff Merkley (OR), Tina Smith (MN) and Mazie Hirono (HI).

These are among the most stalwart advocates calling attention to the unending traumatization of migrant children at the U.S. Southern border.

But there is an important point that needs to be corrected.

It's not prison.

Unfortunately, some elected officials are getting it wrong. Take for example Escobar's statement that the children in the Tornillo Center – and by implication other such facilities – “...are being held in U.S. government prisons”. Merkley reiterated this inaccurate characterization via Twitter, as did other current and former elected officials.

But the fact is that, as opposed to, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities which are indistinguishable from prisons, the Tornillo center is very much a youth oriented temporary facility run by BCFS (formerly known as Baptist Child and Family Services), contracted to do so by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

A colleague and I visited the center in September and were duly impressed with the physical setup and the staff's commitment to creating an environment that is very much focused on the needs and comfort of the children housed there.

We randomly entered several large, air-conditioned tents and found the kids to be engaged and, for the most part, content and attended to by what appeared to be caring staff members.

This is by no means where these children should be. They are separated from family, many traumatized by the travails of coming to and across the border, all arriving without a parent or other relative. But it is not prison, and the hard-working people at the Tornillo Center deserve accuracy.

Still it essential that we are clear about what is happening, and where the responsibility lies.

From last Summer's zero tolerance policy that forcibly separated children from their parents at our Southern border, to tear gassing of children, to the collapse of the youth detention and placement system, we need to look no further than the Trump Administration. Their policies are and have been based on cruelty as strategies designed to deter immigration, even for people fleeing some of the most dangerous countries on the planet.

America needs clear, secure borders, of course. But it also needs a major overhaul of our immigration system generally. Part of this should be how we create pathways to citizenship and how we can assure proper treatment of legitimate asylum seekers.

No matter what, no child should ever be used as a pawn, exploited to score political or ideological points. To do so, undermines everything we stand for.

*Irwin Redlener, M.D., is president emeritus and co-founder of Children's Health Fund and director of Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness. He is a professor at the Mailman School of Public Health and the author of [The Future of Us: What the Dreams of Children Mean for 21st Century America](#).*