

Better medical care for detainees urged  
Friday, June 20, 2008  
Last updated: Friday June 20, 2008, 7:14 AM  
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Immigration advocates on Thursday denounced the immigrant detention system as inhumane and expressed support for a proposed bill that aims to improve medical care for detainees.

Standing across the street from the Elizabeth Detention Center, a converted warehouse in Elizabeth that holds some 300 non-criminal detainees, the advocates cited recent published reports that said more than 60 people have died in recent years while in the custody of immigration officials.

#### FAST FACTS

The Detainee Basic Medical Care Act was introduced by Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J. A similar bill was introduced in the House of Representatives by Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif. The bill requires that:

The Department of Homeland Security give immigration detainees access to medications they need, both during detention and during transfers.

Subject to immigration laws, each detainee with a serious medical or mental health condition be given priority for release on parole or to an alternative detention program.

The medical and mental health of a detainee be considered in a decision to transfer the person to another detention facility.

The death of a detainee be reported to inspectors general of the departments of Homeland Security and Justice no later than 48 hours after it occurs.

Source: The Detainee Basic Medical Care Act of 2008

"The lack of federal immigration reform has contributed to the death of these detainees," said Shai Goldstein, executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network. "That is unacceptable and un-American."

The group of a couple dozen advocates, about half of whom were clergy, said they wanted to draw attention to legislation introduced by Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., that establishes procedures for medical services to immigrant detainees.

Describing the medical care at immigrant detention centers as a haphazard one that has denied detainees adequate — and even lifesaving — medication, Menendez says the

Detainee Basic Medical Care Act would ensure that detention would "never amount to a death sentence."

Officials of the Newark office of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which oversees the center, declined comment on the accusations about medical care, citing pending litigation. But, ICE spokesman Harold Ort said: "ICE meets the highest standards of law enforcement."

At one point during the press conference, two employees of Corrections Corporation of America, the private contractor that operates the center, walked toward the group and asked questions of some people, including reporters, including their names and the advocates' purpose.

One of the employees, a man whose name tag said "Dickerson," jotted down notes while looking at the group. CCA later confirmed that T. Dickerson is the center's assistant warden.

"Is that Jim McGreevey?" asked the other employee, a woman. Dickerson looked at McGreevey, then scribbled in his notebook. James McGreevey, the former governor and current student at an Episcopal seminary in New York, said only that he was there as a parishioner of All Saints Episcopal Parish in Hoboken, with All Saints' pastor, Jeff Curtis.

Later, the advocates assailed the CCA employees, saying their presence was meant to intimidate. Several advocates said they visit the detainees in the center and have heard and seen some troubling things firsthand.

The conference was part of a national event, "A Night of One Thousand Conversations," meant to spotlight concerns about immigrant detention and enforcement actions by immigration agents.