



Mayor: More immigrant families freed than deported

By JUAN CARLOS LLORCA
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One of three centers used for detaining Central American families who have entered the U.S. illegally this year has started releasing many more detainees than it deports, a New Mexico city official said.

Federal immigration authorities reported 61 releases and no deportations last week at the Artesia Family Residential Center in southeastern New Mexico, Artesia Mayor Phillip Burch said.

It was at least the second week in a row that Immigrations and Customs Enforcement authorities reported to Artesia officials that more detainees were released than deported.

The numbers show a dramatic change from the center's first two weeks, when 135 people were deported and 12 were released, according to figures provided to Burch by ICE officials. The center opened in late June and is one of three in the U.S. used to detain migrant families, mostly Central American mothers and children fleeing violence and poverty in their countries.

El Paso's ICE spokeswoman Leticia Zamarripa did not immediately provide information explaining why releases are outnumbering deportations or whether it's happening at facilities for families in Pennsylvania and Texas. ICE's spokeswoman in Washington D.C. Gillian Christensen said the agency is working to provide that information.

However, experts said factors that likely led to the change include detainees having better access to lawyers, and new judges setting lower bond amounts.

The Artesia barracks can house up to 650 women and children.

Zamarripa said 324 people held in the center have been deported to Central America since it opened. Burch said 227 detainees have been released.

Federal officials haven't said how many people have been released and referred questions to the U.S. Justice Department's immigration review office. That office said it would take 10 to 15 days before The Associated Press could obtain the numbers.

Homeland Secretary Jeh Johnson said in July the facility would serve as a processing center to

quickly deport people through expedited removal.

Civil rights advocates later sued the government, complaining a lack of access to legal representation turned the center into a "deportation mill." They said bail was being set impossibly high, and asylum claims were denied at a much higher rate than the rest of the immigrant population.

ICE recently opened a place where attorneys can meet with clients and set up a private room for lawyers. The agency also has provided mothers the opportunity to leave their children in a separate room if they need to discuss traumatic experiences that would make them eligible for asylum.

Laura Lichter, an immigration attorney working with detainees in Artesia, said judges listening to cases closed-circuit from Colorado are imposing much lower bonds for immigrants who are granted release. Previously, Virginia-based judges were imposing bonds as high as \$30,000.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst for the Cato Institute, said better access to legal representation and pressure on the Obama Administration from immigrant advocates likely played roles in more Artesia detainees being released.

"But I think better lawyering probably played a bigger role," Nowrasteh said. "Better access to attorneys is key, and as long as detainees have legal representation, this trend will likely continue."

Associated Press writer Russell Contreras in Albuquerque, New Mexico, contributed to this report.