

HOMESTEAD: THE PERVERSION OF A NAME

By Russ Peterson

Homestead: a home, some land, a lot of hard work, but the hope for a better future. The reality of the Homestead "temporary influx facility" in Homestead, Florida, is anything but. It's a prison for children, ages 13-17.

The sign at the Allendale United Methodist Church says it all:

AMBER ALERT

1600 CHILDREN DETAINED FOR PROFIT

HOMESTEAD FL

There's only one thing wrong with the sign; the number of children is now 2200 to 2300 with plans to expand soon to 3200.

And it's all legal because as a "temporary influx center" the Trump administration is able to circumvent the 1997 Flores court decision that declared that minors could not be held for more than 20 days in a "detention" facility.

According to multiple reports, the children are housed in dorms that resemble military barracks. Up to 250 kids in a unit, strictly regulated like the prison that it is: up at 6:30; marched 25 to a group; no touching or hugging; limited time for meals, showers, recreation; then lights out.

According to an NPR report, a tour guide pointed out a soccer field, a room where calls home could be made, and school classrooms. The guide also depicted holiday parties and talent shows with pizza and ice cream. Leecia Welch, senior director of legal advocacy and child welfare at the National Center for Youth Law has stated "We see a very different picture. We see extremely traumatized children, some of whom sit across from us and can't stop crying over what they're experiencing." Could this be the reason that Congresswomen Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Donna Shalala, and Debbie Mucarsel-Powell were denied entry to the facility?

The Nazis made similar false representations. During a visit several years ago to the WW II Terezin prison camp outside Prague, I learned that when visitors came to the camp they were not shown reality. Rather, for example, they were shown ultra clean toilet facilities that in fact no prisoner used because they had no running water. The actual facilities were filthy.

And, all of the work at Homestead is done for profit. Comprehensive Health Services, which operates the facility, was recently awarded a 341 million

dollar no bid contract. It costs approximately \$775 per child per day to house the children.

It is time to shut this facility down: it costs too much and it's immoral. There are less expensive and more efficient ways to solve the problem, like investing in more judges and courtrooms to expedite the asylum process. Also, this obscenity is yet another time we as a nation have strayed from our values. It joins such scars on our history as slavery, Jim Crow, and Japanese internment. As George Santayana told us in 1905, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." And, as Jesus instructs in Matthew 25:31-46, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."