

Testimony of Yazmin Juarez
before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Wednesday, July 10, 2019

Thank you Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Roy and members of the Committee for inviting me to your hearing. My name is Yazmin Juarez. My daughter Mariee and I fled Guatemala last year, seeking asylum in the United States. We made this journey because we feared for our lives in Guatemala. The trip was dangerous, but I was more afraid of what might happen to us if we stayed. So, we came to America, where I hoped to build a better, safer life for us. That did not happen. Instead, I watched my baby girl die – slowly and painfully – a few months before her second birthday.

It is painful for me to relive this experience and remember her suffering. But I am here to do this because the world should know what happened to my Mariee. The world should know what is happening to so many babies and children inside these ICE detention facilities. My bright beautiful girl is gone but I hope her story will spur America's government to act, so that more children do not die at the hands of this neglect and mistreatment.

My Mariee had always been a happy, healthy baby. She made the journey from Guatemala without any problems. When we crossed the border and made our claim for asylum, she was the normal, giggly baby she'd always been. We were immediately held in CBP custody for three or four days in a facility known as "la hielera" because it is freezing cold at all times. We were locked in a cage with about 20 other people, including children, and forced to sleep on a concrete floor.

Four days later, we were sent to the ICE detention center in Dilley, Texas. A nurse examined Mariee when we arrived and found her perfectly healthy. At Dilley, we were packed into a room with five other mothers with children, a total of 12 people in our room. I noticed immediately how many sick kids there were – and no effort was made to separate the sick from the healthy. One of the other little boys in our room who was about Mariee's age had a constant cough, runny nose and was sleepy all the time. His mom tried to bring him to the clinic, but they kept being sent back without getting care. I found out then that the clinic was only open during certain times, so if you were still in line when it was supposed to close, they sent you away without being seen and told you to come back another day.

Within a week at Dilley, it started to happen to Mariee. She got sick – first it was coughing and sneezing. I brought her to the clinic, where I waited in line with many other people in a large room like a gymnasium to get medical care for her. We were able to get in and see a physician's assistant, who examined Mariee and said she had a respiratory infection. She gave her Tylenol, honey for her cough and told me to follow up in six months.

But the next day, Mariee was worse. She was running a fever over 104 degrees and began having diarrhea and vomiting as well. She wouldn't eat, and I remember her head felt so hot.

I was terrified so I brought her back to the clinic and waited in line again. This time a different physician assistant told me she had an ear infection and gave her antibiotics, but I know my baby and I knew it was something more serious. I begged them to conduct more exams, but they sent us back to our room and said to come back if Mariee got worse.

I tried to come back – multiple times. I'd wait in line early in the morning when the clinic opened with dozens of other mothers with their sick children. Twice I was turned away and told to come back another day.

When I finally managed to have Mariee seen in the clinic again she'd lost 2 full pounds – almost 8 percent of her body weight – in just 10 days. She was still vomiting and coughing constantly, but a third physician's assistant just gave me Tylenol and Pedialyte, and told me to come back in a week.

Mariee did not get better. She was still running a fever nearly a week later, when I brought her back to the clinic and she was finally seen by an actual doctor. The doctor told me to give her Pedialyte, ibuprofen, Zyrtec and Vicks VapoRub. I didn't learn until after she died that you aren't supposed to give Vicks VapoRub to kids under 2-years-old because it could cause respiratory problems.

I felt hopeful that day for the first time because Mariee was seen by a real doctor, and I left the clinic thinking this would be the treatment that made her better. It wasn't. Two days later, I went back to the clinic and begged a nurse to examine Mariee's lungs because she continued to cough and it had been nearly two weeks. The nurse said they would make a referral.

My poor baby girl got sicker and sicker over the next couple days. She was vomiting constantly, running a fever and wouldn't eat or sleep. Her body was limp and hot – I was watching her get more and more sick and was becoming more desperate by the day to find something to make her better. I finally received a notice that Mariee had an appointment with a doctor at 8 o'clock the next morning. I was so relieved. But that appointment never happened. Instead, at 5am we were woken up and taken to a gymnasium to be processed for transfer out of detention. We were left there for hours. I couldn't leave to go to the clinic.

After several hours we were taken to the airport to get a flight to New Jersey, where my mom lives. On the day we left Dilley to fly from Texas to New Jersey, Mariee never was seen by any medical staff. I found out later that her medical records from Dilley said she had no medical restrictions and was "medically cleared."

I was terrified by the time we landed in New Jersey. Mariee was so sick on the flight that other passengers said to me that she needed to see a doctor. My mom and I took Mariee to a pediatrician as soon as we could the next morning, and just a few hours later we brought her to the emergency room. She was struggling to breathe and was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit with a viral lung infection. Over the next 6 weeks, she was transferred to another hospital that specialized in treating children with serious medical conditions. I watched as my little girl

suffered horrible pain. She was poked and prodded with all kinds of needles, underwent countless tests, and eventually needed a ventilator to help her breath. She was attached to so many wires that I couldn't even hold her to comfort her when she cried.

All the hard work of doctors at two different hospitals came too late. My Mariee died on May 10, 2018. When I walked out of the hospital that day, all I had with me was a piece of paper with Mariee's handprints in pink paint. The nurses made it for me the day before, as a Mother's Day gift.

There are days I just want to give up, thinking about never seeing her or holding her again. I try hard to remember the good times – her laugh, how her hugs felt, and I am grateful to have had my little angel for the short time I did. I wish I had protected her better. I wish I could have given her the safer, better life we came to this country to build. I can't do that now, but I can try to make sure her suffering helps other little girls and boys.

It didn't have to be like this.

Mariee was a healthy baby girl when she was taken into ICE custody. But 20 days later, she left with a life-threatening infection. Small children do not belong in detention. But if ICE's detention center had just been safe and sanitary – and if they'd given my daughter the proper medical care she needed – Mariee might still be here today, preparing to celebrate her third birthday in August.

Instead, my daughter is gone. The people who run these facilities are supposed to take care of these children – little angels who have done nothing wrong. Most of the children are brought here by parents seeking a better, safer life for them.

I'm here today because I don't want another little angel to suffer like my Mariee. I don't want other mothers and fathers to lose their children. It can't be that hard in this great country to make sure that the little children you lock up don't die from abuse and neglect.

Thank you again to the Committee for inviting me here today. I will do my best to answer any questions.