

**House Judiciary Committee:  
Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship**

**Hearing entitled: “The Expansion and Troubling Use of ICE Detention”**

Written Testimony of Selene Saavedra-Roman

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Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony about this extremely important matter which profoundly affects the lives of detained individuals every day:

I felt a tug on my arm. Someone was pulling my sweater. I had later found out her name was Flor, she was my left bunk neighbor. She said to me, “Levántate. Te toca limpiar.” Or in English, “Wake up, it’s your turn to clean.” My eyelids were heavy as they scanned the room for a clock. I shoved my thick framed pink glasses on. They were my favorite pair from Warby Parker. My eyes found a clock near the one door of the hall. It was 4:25 a.m. I had less than 5 hours of sleep since my intake process. I honestly thought the girl was joking with me. I thought ‘there’s no way I have to clean.’ I moved the worn-down gray knit blanket across from me and looked around again taking in my environment. I remember being hesitant about removing my blanket as it was freezing throughout the night. I was wearing 2 sweaters and 2 pairs of socks with my pants tucked into them. I had to assume the fetal position just to conserve what little warmth I had.

As I stretched, I wondered why my neck had a crook. Then I looked at my “pillow”. My pillow was an embedded shallow-like bump featured on the inside end of the bed. My back was sore. The mattress was made of hard plastic. As I looked around, I saw about 60 blue metal bunk beds lined up next to each other against the pale blue painted walls, identical to the ones from Orange is the New Black’s latest season. Each one contained a woman, waking up from their deep slumber with messy tangled dried up hair, eyes full of sadness, and hungry faces with starving stomachs. The ladies were either dressed in orange or blue prison attire. I looked down and remembered what I had on: a blue top with a pocket where I kept my I.D. with a white undershirt.

I was also given 2 pairs of used underwear. I made sure I placed some toilet paper or a pad on the underwear to serve as a liner for sanitization purposes. And blue pants and shoes that resembled vans but made by Bob Barker. I swore to speak to Bob Barker after I got out to improve the quality of the clothes and shoes, which was appalling. I grew up poor but never had to wear rags like the ones I had in the detention center. This was so demeaning; it was something I had to get used to.

In addition to our assigned attire, we wore bracelets which identified us with our alien registration number and a picture. These bracelets were essential. It was the lifeline to go outside for recreation time or to get lunch. If one of us forgot to bring our bracelet, we couldn’t scan the bracelet in the cafeteria because the guard would send us back to our dorm and by the time our

head guard dorm could send us back, lunch time will be over and the detainees would give up and wouldn't eat. As to our hair we weren't allowed to bring in hair ties so we made do with using the stretchy end of latex gloves and made those into hair accessories.

“Apurate, limpia el baño,” Flor said in an urgent voice that interrupted my sleepy observations. I was on the top bunk and proceeded cautiously down the metal ladders. I was given a large broom and directed to clean the showers. That's when I met Rosa. She had a high ponytail which resembled bird feathers coming out of her head. She was of a shorter stature due to poor nutrition as a child. Her skin was tan (brown) like mine and she had dark brown eyes like mine. Her hair was black like mine. As I stared at her I noticed we were similar. We were both human, born in different countries on the same path starting at different times in our lives. I began my journey at four years old, she recently started hers at the age of seventeen. She traveled from the Guatemalan mountains for a better opportunity and I had traveled from *los cerros de* [the mountains of] Peru. She smiled and handed me the bucket full of a soapy mixture of water and shower gel. We were to clean off the hair and germs with brooms. Go figure. My job was done, and the loud voice of the guard resonated throughout the hall “Chow time! Line up! Ladies, time to get up.” We lined up and proceeded to breakfast right before 5 a.m. in the morning.

When you're thrown into the pit, you learn as you go. You don't have any other option, or this place will consume you.

You might wonder how I got here - how can an educated woman of 28 years of age on her way to citizenship would end up in a detention center. I am Selene Saavedra-Roman. I was brought to the United States of America, undocumented, at the age of 4. I traveled more than 3,000 miles from Peru to get to the land of the American Dream. Until recently, I was the recipient of Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

In early November of 2018, I received my conditional offer of employment for a flight attendant position at Mesa Airlines Inc. I screamed with joy when I received my acceptance e-mail. I was delighted to start a new career. I had to get everything ready as training started in two weeks. I was overwhelmed with all the possibilities to expand on this career. As I looked back, I realized I did not want to live the rest of my years in one place and would rather explore while I had the energy to do so. My mentality was to live my life to the fullest. And that's what this little bird did, she spread her wings to fly.

After two rough months of absorbing course materials and exams we earned our wings. I started my journey in Phoenix, Arizona and ended in Houston, Texas in January 2019 where I was based at the George W. Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH). IAH became my second home. I spent more hours at the airport during my probation period than my actual home. Little did I know that, as I was getting comfortable in my second home, I would have my life turned upside down. My new home would be made of cold concrete walls and an unstoppable deportation machine.

I woke up the early Tuesday morning of February 12, 2019. Today was just like any other day where I start getting ready at 5 a.m. for a day in the air. I was a bit nervous about my first international flight, but I received reassurance from Mesa Airlines the day prior to flying out to Monterrey, Mexico. I served first class on United Express. I served coffee and had a friendly chat with the passengers on the first row. They were a lovely couple heading to their home in Mexico. We spoke about my Apple watch and how technology is advancing so fast these days. I absolutely love my job. I love serving others and interacting with them. I love putting a smile on

their face. When passengers step into the airplane, they step into my house and I'm the hostess for the duration of the flight. I meet their needs and make sure they have happy travels to their destination. We landed in Monterrey, cleared customs, and grabbed lunch with the crew. I was assigned this four-day trip with the crew and I was looking forward to getting to know the other flight attendant since we were about the same age.

We took a plane back to IAH where we went through U.S. customs and that was the last time I saw the crew. I was escorted to a waiting room by a U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer. This is where my nightmare began.

I was interviewed by two different CBP officers. Then it was determined after 24 hours that I was to be sent to a detention center. I was able to notify my mother and my husband via text who were able to immediately contact my lawyer. At this point in time, my world shattered around me.

This is how I would be spending Valentine's Day, at the Montgomery Processing Center, a detention center in Conroe, Texas with a capacity of 1,000 people.<sup>1</sup> I never knew what it was like to be lonely and yet be surrounded by so many people until that day. I felt hopeless, powerless, and lost. All I wanted to do was cry and I did. I cried tears of sadness and shook in fear.

I thought I had done everything right. My husband and my first step in the application for residency was approved. I'm a graduate of Texas A&M. I have a Bachelor's in Allied Health with a minor in Communication. I was President of the Peruvian Student Association (PSA). I am a daughter of immigrants, I am a sister to U.S. citizens, and wife to my dearest husband whose family had dedicated themselves to serving this country for a combined 50 years. My husband has a Bachelors in International Business and Masters in Health Administration. He works diligently and runs his own company. We were working towards residency, and yet I was detained with no idea whatsoever on the length of my stay. Each additional day that I was there, I felt even more hopeless, even more lost. I had lost hope in America, my country.

The detention center was in Conroe, Texas. It was newer, you could tell the paint was fresh. Every time The GEO Group, Inc executive staff or other visitors would pay a visit they would repaint it. While I was there, the executive staff came multiple times. They would even bring in all the reserve staff on these days to make sure that they were attentive of the center. This place was a privately- owned facility. You could tell that on a superficial level they wanted to make the best impressions to the public (or their investors), but in reality, the level of care was abysmal at best.

The food was always cold and tasteless, and even though we were starving we were gaining weight. Were they putting growth hormones in the food? It was a thought we all wondered. We were never provided with fruit. Our diet consisted of beans, rice and other spicy food items which caused us gastrointestinal distress. Even the vending machines were filled with junk food and the idea of gluten-free options for someone who might need them was impossible.

Ironically, we were grateful for executive staff coming to visit because that meant we had more time to eat instead of the usual rushed 15 minute period. The guards wouldn't rush us, and would

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.geogroup.com/FacilityDetail/FacilityID/249>

clean up between each lunch period. If there wasn't this oversight, then they would make us sit at dirty tables filled with wasted food. Then the guards would wait until the last dorm hall came and finished lunch to ask for volunteers to clean the cafeteria. Can you imagine the mess? I didn't think it was sanitary.

I knew not to argue or talk back, refusing to obey the guards' commands would end up hurting us greatly. I watched one woman refuse to clean (she had already cleaned the dorm next door) and as a result she was put in isolation for several weeks. When she came out of isolation, she looked so distraught. She had plucked away her eyebrows from all the stress she endured. Why are we being forced to clean? This made no sense to me, this is a detention center, a holding cell while we await our immigration trials. Why were we all being treated like this? The guards would wake us up at all odd hours of the night, it was a mandatory task. If you volunteered for the work program you would be compensated \$1 an hour. If you refused to clean, it would be written on your record. We were made to believe that refusing any orders would lead to write ups which would then directly affect our immigration cases. Many women worried that it would hurt their asylum case or they would be put in the segregation housing unit (SHU). It was the perennial, over-looming thought that consumed us. That feeling permeated the entire dorm.

The difficulty of navigating the judicial system was an impossible task. I speak English fluently, graduated from college, had an attorney and my husband to support me in my case, and yet the system is so complicated, it feels like you are set up to fail. And if this is my situation, what is it like for women who don't speak any English, have a very limited educational background, no attorney, and no other support?

We did everything correctly. All of the back and forth between my husband, my lawyers, and my immigration officer felt hopeless and pointless. We had applied for parole, but the paperwork seemed to get lost in the red tape. As time went on it felt more hopeless, my immigration officer was providing less support and hiding more truths. I felt I was being intentionally misled. The week before my release he had informed me and not my attorney, that my DACA had been revoked, essentially enabling my deportation process. Was he keeping me here on purpose and delaying the process long enough to deport me without resistance?

At this time my husband became fully aware of his intentions and the type of people we were dealing with. He contacted every news outlet he could. The Points Guy (the same news source that reported the United plane dragging off a doctor) reported my story. The story got the attention of Sara Nelson (President of the AFA), and within 24 hours the story had national attention and I was released shortly after. I thought I did everything right. I have DACA, I was halfway through my residency paperwork, I went to a place of higher education, married a US citizen, and I paid all my taxes. This did not matter to CBP, this did not matter to ICE, and this did not matter to GEO.

I am not alone in this situation. I'm not the only victim of the broken immigration system and its faulty regulations. I met other women in there who were picked up for a broken taillight. One woman had accidentally placed an item underneath her Wal-Mart shopping cart. She was taken in for theft even though she admitted to making a mistake and offered to pay for the item at that exact moment. She had now been in there for three months waiting on a bond. I also met two legal residents who were also, like me, detained at the airport because of misdemeanors from seven to ten years ago. I also met women that had been seeking asylum for more than 10 years and had been randomly picked up by ICE. I met Venezuelans seeking asylum as well.

Most of the women in the detention center were young. I asked them if they were scared to come here by themselves and they said yes but that they had to go on this journey because there is nothing for them at home. I could see the excitement in their eyes when they were talking about America. I could also see how their souls were so distraught at not being able to accomplish their goal of being free in America. This trek leaves you financially depleted, emotionally drained, and sometimes physically tormented or sexually abused. One would not take this trip for fun. It is taken out of true dire need. Wouldn't you make the trek to a country where you could flourish? I spoke to all the women there. Many were from Africa, Mexico, and Central America, as well as Czechoslovakia, India, and Canada. And all they wanted was a life like mine, one that my parents worked so hard to provide for me. And one that my husband was able to provide for me also. And one that I was also to provide for myself, the true American dream. I believed myself to be an all-American girl. But America, seemed, to not want me.

My husband, faithfully, continued to fight for my freedom. He contacted Mesa Airlines immediately when this incident happened. He worked feverously with my immigration lawyer who in turn was at the mercy of my ICE agent. He told me every day that he cried, and that his depression had returned. His father had to live with him to help with legal paperwork and to keep him alive and mentally stable. We were never allowed contact. I was being held in a civil detention facility, so, why was I not allowed physical contact with my husband? Seeing him through thick glass during our visitation hour was the most arduous as I could not hug him.

About a month into my detention time, my husband had enough of the system. He decided to do what needed to be done. He went public. And I am forever grateful for his perseverance and determination to free his wife from this unjust system we had put our faith in.

My trauma has surpassed psychological bounds. I am forever scared. I did not realize how depressed I had become. My suicidal thoughts reared its head while I was in the detention center. The detention center dehumanized me. Never in my whole life have I considered picking up a razor blade and cutting my wrists...until I was at Montgomery Processing Center. I neglected myself and my self-care was non-existent. I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror. I wasn't the person who I was before this whole situation happened. I had changed. I became depressed. Because of the conditions I was forced to endure, I found myself seeking psychological help after my release. I had to open and relive my trauma to heal. I had to feel vulnerable again. I am still not completely who I was before.

It has taken a lot of energy to write this testimony, but I am doing it because we cannot stay quiet. The people of the United States need to know the real truth of what is going on in these detention centers.

In addition to what I describe above, here are some examples of conditions I experienced and observed which show how detention centers are a dehumanizing experience for everyone detained in them. No one should be subjected to these conditions.

- Racism and prejudice from the Geo guards
- Sexist remarks from a female warden
- No adequate access to medical care (difficult to access medical care unless you sign up for sick call at 5 am)
- Lack of basic sanitation
- Overworked staff due to shortage and lack of hiring

- Inappropriate relationships between detainees and guards
- Fluorescent lighting on all day
- No personal space: all I had was the top mattress that was part of a bunk bed in a room filled with about 60 bunk beds.
- No items to decorate/personalize your bunk bed area
- Complicated legal software called LexisNexis – not user friendly
- Prolonged periods indoor without recreation time