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Abuse and Cover-Up': Complaint alleges sexual assault, retaliation at for-profit immigrant prison in Georgia

Immigrants held at a privately operated detention center in Georgia were subjected to a pattern of sexual assault and retaliation by guards for reporting repeated assaults against people detained there, according to an administrative complaint filed this week by the Southern Poverty Law Center and a coalition of human rights groups. Filed yesterday on behalf of four women, the complaint details firsthand accounts from immigrants who were detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) at Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia. The complaint, which details abuse that took place from July 2021 to January 2022, includes reports from women who say a male nurse sexually assaulted them while they sought medical care at the facility. The nurse is employed by CoreCivic, which operates the private immigrant prison. While in detention, two of the incarcerated immigrant women notified Stewart officials of the nurse's behavior. Both of them submitted multiple reports and were repeatedly threatened with retaliation, legal action, prison time and prolonged detention. Officers also withheld food from one woman to discourage participation during internal investigations. The complaint was the subject of a press conference today at the ICE Atlanta field office by El Refugio, a nonprofit that helps detained immigrants, and grassroots community leaders and organizations. "To the survivors, our community is here to say, 'We see you, we hear you. No one deserves these abuses. We care about you, we value you and we worry about you,'" Amilcar Valencia, director of El Refugio, said at the press conference. "We're also here to say — not one more!" Johanna Garcia, advocacy coordinator for El Refugio, said at the press conference. "How many more Black and Brown bodies have to be sacrificed in order to make change?" In the complaint, one woman identified as Viviana Doe states, "I'm livid knowing that this man is still working at Stewart after having abused me and so many girls, even when the entire Stewart staff knew what happened. It scares me so much to see Stewart staff cover up to allow the abuse of so many women, and that the employee who sexually harassed me is still there, exposed to hundreds of women." The complaint was filed with various offices within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) by a collaboration of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, El Refugio, Georgia Detention Watch, Georgia Human Rights Clinic, Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR), Owings MacNorlin LLC, Project South and the SPLC. "These brave women took a huge risk by sharing these disturbing accounts, which unfortunately are not isolated incidents," said Monica Whatley, project coordinator for the SPLC's Southeast Immigrant Freedom Initiative, which provides free, direct legal representation to detained immigrants. "They confirm what community organizers, human rights advocates and detained immigrants have warned for years — ICE detention centers are fundamentally inhumane, corrupt and rife with abuse and cover-up." The four immigrant women also submitted licensing complaints against the nurse with the Georgia Licensing Board seeking disciplinary actions for violations of the rules and laws governing his practice. Advocacy organizations also filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for records related to medical care of people in ICE custody at Stewart. "I can't sleep just thinking about so many women being abused by this male nurse, and I don't understand how they allow that man to keep working at Stewart Detention Center, after all the staff know he is a sexual offender," a woman identified as Maria Doe stated in the complaint. "Why do they continue to cover up his actions? For what purpose? How many more women must be victims of this corrupt center? All I want is for justice to be done and for this man to never abuse more women. They must stop violating the human rights of all women at Stewart. Enough of torturing us!" The allegations against the nurse form part of a series of complaints regarding medical abuse and reckless misconduct at Stewart and other ICE detention facilities. Stewart has long been at the center of multiple investigations surrounding its abusive treatment of immigrants in detention and is currently under investigation by the DHS Office of Inspector General. It has the highest reported number of deaths due to COVID-19 of any ICE facility, as well as the highest reported numbers of COVID-19 cases among ICE detention centers. Immigrant rights advocates and human rights groups have repeatedly called for the closure of Stewart and release of people in detention. In numerous reports, investigations and lawsuits, the groups have documented Stewart's improper use of solitary confinement, numerous deaths from suicide, horrific conditions, forced labor, widespread exposure to COVID-19, failure to follow pandemic response requirements, medical neglect and racial discrimination. Stewart also

has been at the center of media investigative reports on the use of force by the staff of CoreCivic, the country's largest private prison company. The announcement of multiple incidents of sexual assault at Stewart comes after ICE ended its contract with the Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia in May 2021, after human rights groups exposed medical abuse against migrant women there. "While GLAHR is appalled to hear of the abuse and retaliation that these brave survivors have endured, we are not surprised, given the pervasive history of abuse and human rights violations at detention centers in Georgia," said GLAHR Executive Director Adelina Nicholls. "The closure of Stewart is imperative to protect immigrants from further harm." The transfer of immigrant women from Irwin to Stewart does not resolve the systemic and rampant mistreatment and neglect of people detained in South Georgia detention centers, as was most recently observed by the Office of Inspector General in its report regarding inhumane conditions at Folkston ICE Processing Center, only three hours southeast of Stewart. This ineffective transfer strategy is underscored by the current complaints of repeated sexual assaults occurring amid an active investigation at Stewart. The human rights groups and the complainants are calling for a thorough investigation of the allegations, the immediate closure of Stewart, the release of people currently in detention, reparation and a path to immigration relief in the United States. "It is abominable for the administration to have transferred migrant women to the Stewart Detention Center and to continue to keep them there, knowing full well about the history of well-documented egregious abuse at this ICE prison," said Azadeh Shahshahani, legal and advocacy director at Project South. "It is high time for Stewart to be shut down and for all detained migrants to be released."