

Evangelicals decry reported hysterectomies on detainees

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WASHINGTON (BP)—A group of evangelical Christian leaders called for the federal government to make public its investigation into a report of hysterectomies performed on women without their consent at a Georgia immigrant detention center.

Leaders of the Evangelical Immigration Table issued a statement Sept. 17 commending the Department of Homeland Security investigation into allegations made by a nurse and calling for “full transparency and strong accountability” regarding a finding of any misconduct. If the allegations of unapproved hysterectomies and other medical mistreatment prove true, the evangelicals said they “condemn them in the strongest possible terms.”

A 27-page complaint filed Sept. 14 includes the testimony of Dawn Wooten, a whistleblower who worked as a licensed nurse at the Irwin County Detention Center in Ocilla, Ga. Of an unnamed, outside doctor who treated women detainees, Wooten said “just about everybody” he sees has a hysterectomy. While some women require hysterectomies, “everybody’s uterus cannot be that bad,” she said, according to the complaint.

In addition to the charges of nonconsensual hysterectomies, the complaint filed by four immigrant advocacy organizations asserted medical officials at the privately owned center refused to test detainees for COVID-19, put both detainees and staff at risk with their practices regarding the virus, shredded medical requests from the detainees and falsified medical records.

‘An affront to our pro-life ethic’

In their statement, the Evangelical Immigration Table leaders—who said they affirm “the God-given dignity of every person”—described the violations of the female detainees, if true, as “an affront to our pro-life ethic.”

Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said in comments accompanying the Evangelical Immigration Table statement the alleged violations “should rattle all but the most seared-over consciences.”



Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (Photo/Amber Dion)

“We have sadly grown to expect such questions of medical maleficence by brutal regimes elsewhere in the world, but we never expected to have to address such allegations about our own country,” he said. “If anything approaching the allegations of this whistleblower complaint happened, everyone involved should be held accountable.”

Evangelical leaders also commenting in support of the investigation were

these organizational presidents: Walter Kim, National Association of Evangelicals; Gabriel Salguero, National Latino Evangelical Coalition; Scott Arbeiter, World Relief; Shirley Hoogstra, Council for Christian Colleges and Universities; and Hyepin Im, Faith and Community Empowerment. Other organizations that are part of EIT's leadership are Bethany Christian Services, The Wesleyan Church and World Vision.

In their statement, the Evangelical Immigration Table leaders also urged the DHS inspector general to analyze the department's oversight of the conditions and health care at all immigrant detention centers.

"Protecting the lives of detainees, staff and the surrounding communities should be a top priority for DHS," they said.

ICE medical director denies worst allegations

Regarding the doctor who allegedly performed the nonconsensual hysterectomies, Wooten said in the complaint other nurses and she have "questioned among ourselves like goodness he's taking everybody's stuff out. ... That's his specialty, he's the uterus collector."

Wooten also said, "I've had several inmates tell me that they've been to see the doctor, and they've had hysterectomies, and they don't know why they went or why they're going.

"These immigrant women, I don't think they really, totally, all the way understand this is what's going to happen depending on who explains it to them," she said.

Allegations in the complaint were also based on interviews with detainees.

LaSalle Corrections, a private company, operates the Irwin County

Detention Center, which is supervised by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, according to *USA Today*.

Ada Rivera, medical director of the ICE Health Service Corps., denied “the implication that detainees are used for experimental medical procedures” and promised a full investigation, *USA Today* reported. “Detainees are afforded informed consent, and a medical procedure like a hysterectomy would never be performed against a detainee’s will,” she said.

The complaint was filed with DHS and its inspector general, ICE and the Irwin County Detention Center by Project South, Georgia Detention Watch, Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights and South Georgia Immigrant Support Network.