



## **Testimony Before the Universal City City Council**

*November 19, 2019*

Mayor and City Council members:

My name is Fátima Menéndez, and I am a legislative attorney for MALDEF (the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund), a national civil rights law firm, testifying against the zoning request by VisionQuest to open and operate a for-profit immigrant children's detention facility. Based on my recent experiences testifying against VisionQuest, I noticed the change in VisionQuest's presentation to that of a relatable, religious approach, but the facts about VisionQuest and these detention centers remain the same.

The issue of immigration reform and detention has been greatly politicized for decades, but especially in the last few years. It is critical we remember what is at stake before us today. I speak from a long history of experience with the type of facility VisionQuest seeks to open and operate. Prior to my work with MALDEF, I worked as an immigration attorney representing detained children for 4 years. I know many people refer to these facilities as shelters, resettlement campuses or reunification centers, but they are detention facilities. Children are detained in these facilities and in the custody of the federal government, which easily qualifies these facilities as detention centers. I visited my clients in these facilities multiple times per week for 4 years. The children are contained through various security measures, including tall fences, security cameras and barred doors and windows. VisionQuest even mentioned earlier that the children will be monitored 24/7. Although the children detained in these facilities are typically awaiting reunification with family members in the United States, the process can take months and years. During this time, the children are allowed a short phone call with a family member once a week and denied access to most activities that children need to continue to develop mentally, as well as activities that bring joy. I had several children attempt suicide while detained in this type of facility. Part of this can be attributed to the lack of sufficient mental health treatment available to these detained children.

Additionally, VisionQuest provided strong evidence that the mental health treatment provided by them is insufficient earlier during the zoning request presentation. VisionQuest outlined the services provided during the first 4 hours after a child is

transferred to one of their detention facilities, which include: a bath, meal, assignment of clothes, case manager assignment and meeting, physical and mental health evaluations and an orientation. The time allotted for an initial physical and mental health evaluation, especially after the child's arrival from an overcrowded border patrol detention facility filled with adults and children, is inadequate.

I also noticed during today's presentation by VisionQuest that very close attention was paid to my original testimony in which I mentioned the "shelter" photos presented by VisionQuest must have been taken from an InStyle decor magazine because that is not what these detention facilities look like. Although I appreciate VisionQuest stating that they have partnered with a decorator to incorporate stereotypical indigenous decorative schemes, the decorations are not the concern. The concern is that VisionQuest has a history of child abuse, both physical and verbal, by staff in their facilities. In 2017, VisionQuest closed a facility in Philadelphia after several staff members were shown to have physically abused detained children in their custody.<sup>1</sup> This is a problem that persists throughout immigrant detention facilities and the inability of detained immigrant *children* to be able to report this type of abuse to staff or family members allows this problem to occur many times under the radar. These facilities also curtail the mental development and educational advancement of detained children. This reality could worsen if the Trump Administration is successful in its proposal to detain immigrant children for an indefinite amount of time. This plan, along with the President's recent announcement that he would seek to take away recreational and legal aid programs, as well as educational services for detained immigrant children, places these children at even greater risk.

MALDEF urges this city council to accept the zoning commission's recommendation to reject VisionQuest's zoning request to open and operate a for-profit immigrant child detention center.

Thank you for your time.

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<sup>1</sup> Accused of harming children at its North Philly Shelter, VisionQuest now plans to house immigrant youth here. <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/visionquest-immigrant-children-philadelphia-shelter-abuse-20181026.html>.