



## **Testimony Before the Universal City Planning and Zoning Commission**

*November 4, 2019*

Commission members:

My name is Fátima Menéndez, and I am a legislative attorney for MALDEF (the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund), testifying against the zoning request by VisionQuest to open and operate a for-profit immigrant children's detention facility. For decades, MALDEF has conducted litigation and policy work on immigrants' rights issues across the nation and here in Texas on behalf of Latinos.

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, but they are detention facilities and I visited my clients in these facilities multiple times per week for those 4 years. The children are contained through various security measures, including tall fences, security cameras and barred doors and windows. 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.

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>

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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>.

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 commission to reject VisionQuest's zoning request to open and operate a for-profit immigrant child detention center.

Thank you for your time.