Immigration and the Church
Speakers: Mistreatment, little medical care common at detention centers

By: Julia Willis, Catholic News Service  |  Apr. 15, 2015  |  Villanova, Pa.

Although the number of Central American migrants entering the U.S. has diminished in recent months, thousands remain incarcerated within secure detention facilities across the country without hope for release.

After being apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border, families and children as young as 12 days old are held within facilities that not only house hundreds of people for extensive periods of time, but also lack adequate medical or psychological care for their residents.

Speakers discussed the rights of immigrants who have entered the country illegally and the responsibilities that Catholics have to support these individuals during an April 9 conference titled "The Path of the Unaccompanied Minor: Examining Legal and Community Responses to the Humanitarian Crisis," held at the Villanova University School of Law in Pennsylvania.

In conjunction with Catholic Relief Services, the university brought together immigration attorneys, Catholic Charities employees, priests, professors and child migrants to create a discussion regarding the issues that immigrants face after entering the U.S. illegally.

Carol Anne Donahue, an immigration attorney and president of the Greater Reading Immigration Project, described the ethical concerns related to detention.

“The number one ethical issue is that we are detaining these families," Donahue said. "These individuals are following our asylum laws. They are presenting themselves at the border, they are escaping tremendous violence and left with no choice but to come here, and our response is to take these mothers and children and put them in prisons. We can use lovely language, like 'residential center' and 'shelter,' but we are incarcerating children."

Donahue and other immigration attorneys noted that families apprehended at the border are funneled into one of three large detention facilities -- Berks County Residential Center in Leesport, Pa.; Karnes County Residential Center in Karnes City, Texas; or South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas.

Although immigrants caught entering the country illegally were once held within detention facilities briefly before finding family members or friends to sponsor their release, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in July 2014 instated a "no-release policy" that has left individuals with multiple family members in the U.S. detained for as long as four years.
While each of these facilities is equipped with a trained medical staff, Jacquelyn Kline, a partner in the immigration law offices of Cambria & Kline, argued that the medical personnel who work with detained families have proved that they are not equipped to handle either the medical or psychological problems that plague these individuals.

Kline recounted the story of a 2-year-old who was vomiting blood for days before being taken to a nearby hospital to receive curative medical care. During this time, staff prescribed copious amounts of water to treat her symptoms.

"Their prescription for everything is to just drink water -- hot water, cold water, it does not matter. That is what is prescribed within these facilities," Kline said.

Jennifer Nagda, policy director for the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights, explained that there also is "completely inadequate support" for mental health concerns within detention facilities and that many children who arrive in the U.S. "severely traumatized" slowly "deteriorate" in custody.

Bridget Cambria, an immigration lawyer who chose her career path after working as a shelter care counselor at the Berks County Residential Center, revealed that migrants can be further traumatized by events that occur within detention facilities in the U.S.

Cambria said during her time at Berks, a 40-year-old staff member maintained a sexual relationship with a 19-year-old resident in "an institutional case of sexual assault that occurred for several months." Although many residents were aware of the relationship, none spoke up until after a child wandered into a bathroom and witnessed a sexual act in progress.

"The reason that our clients did not tell us this was happening was because residents were told that anyone who knew anything about it would be immediately deported," Kline said. "In many situations, facility staff use fear tactics as a way to control the migrants."

Instead of attempting to regulate the behavior of immigrants, Redemptorist Fr. Bruce Lewandowski, vicar for multicultural ministries in the Philadelphia archdiocese, encouraged conference participants to welcome migrants into the U.S. and recognize Jesus in them.

"There is a right to migrate, and as Catholics we understand that at the most basic level from the Incarnation," Lewandowski said. "God migrated from heaven to earth and that's when the theology and spirituality of migration began -- when Jesus became flesh."

Recognizing that we have "no lasting home on earth," the priest argued that Americans have a responsibility to treat immigrants with compassion and love.

"When we consider a theology of migration, we should consider what Jesus teaches about the limits of compassion," Lewandowski said. "Compassion should know no borders because we are all made in the image and likeness of God and we are all one family."