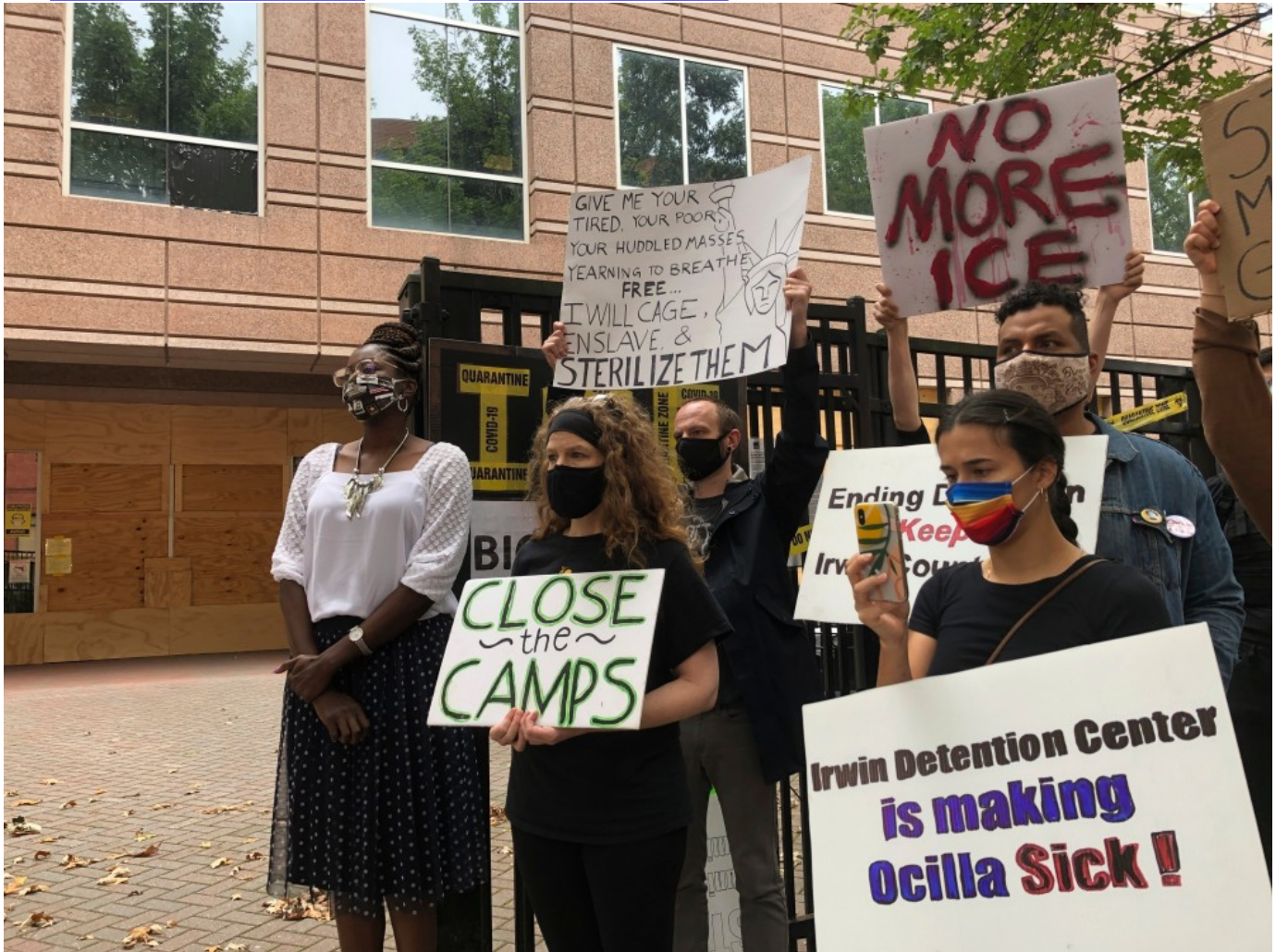


Episcopal priest backs up whistleblower allegations at ICE facility

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue



On September 15, Dawn Wooten (left), a nurse at Irwin County Detention Center in Ocilla, Georgia, spoke at a news conference in Atlanta protesting conditions at the facility. (AP Photo / Jeff Amy)

An Episcopal priest who volunteers at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center in Georgia has said allegations of medical neglect and a high rate of hysterectomies at the facility are consistent with her interactions with women detained there.

“There were gynecological procedures happening at a rate that seemed higher than the norm, to the point that pretty much everyone going (for any gynecological treatment) seemed to be getting the same thing,” Leeann Culbreath told Episcopal News Service.

“There’s enough red flags going up that people may be getting treatment they really don’t need.”

In mid-September, a nurse named Dawn Wooten, who worked at Irwin County Detention Center in Ocilla, Georgia, filed a whistle-blower complaint alleging the detention center has not taken adequate precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

The complaint also noted that “just about everybody” who saw a gynecologist outside the facility was given a hysterectomy, a surgery to remove the uterus, which eliminates the ability to conceive a child. “Everybody’s uterus cannot be that bad,” according to the complaint, which further alleged that some of the women didn’t fully understand why they had the medical procedure.

That’s consistent with what Culbreath has heard from detainees, as well as from other volunteers and attorneys. The priest has advocated for detainees at Irwin County Detention Center since 2016 as a volunteer with the South Georgia Immigrant Support Network.

The detention center is a privately run facility that houses immigrants detained by ICE, which has said the allegations “raise some very serious concerns that deserve to be investigated quickly and thoroughly.”

Meanwhile, the hospital where the gynecologist allegedly performed the hysterectomies told the *Washington Post* that only two women in ICE custody have been referred for the procedure there since 2017.

Several Christian leaders have spoken out about the allegations in the whistleblower complaint, particularly the reports of questionable hysterectomies, which raise moral and ethical concerns and draw on a history of forced sterilizations performed especially on people of color and incarcerated people.

Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, condemned such acts and joined a number of lawmakers and advocacy

organizations calling for an investigation into the whistle-blower complaint.

“God holds each of us responsible for the welfare of our neighbor. We therefore condemn these acts of coerced sterilization as a form of gender-based violence,” Eaton said in a written statement.

“This is especially true when the perpetrators wield significant power and control over women who are at elevated risk of injustice, abuse and violence.”

A number of female faith leaders also released statements condemning the alleged hysterectomies and calling for action through Faith in Public Life, a national social justice movement of clergy and faith leaders.

Jacqui Lewis of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City said the moment calls for “fierce moral urgency.”

“How numb have we become as society when our nation’s leaders barely flinch at crimes against humanity in a modern-day concentration camp? Every person trapped in our immoral detention system is loved by God and deserving of justice,” Lewis said.

More than 160 members of Congress asked the Department of Homeland Security to investigate those allegations and to provide a response briefing on the status of the investigation by September 25. On September 22, a spokesperson for the department confirmed that they had initiated a review of Irwin County Detention Center and would interview Wooten. —Religion News Service