



A Statement of Action on the Berks County Residential Center

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. –Hebrews 13:2 (NRSV)

For the LORD your God... executes justice for the orphan and widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. –Deuteronomy 10:17-19 (NRSV)

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches grieves the mistreatment and unreasonably lengthy detention of refugee mothers and children who have been forced to live in the Berks County Residential Center (BCRC) by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Service (ICE). Their detention further perpetuates the xenophobia that has become increasingly common in our state and nation. We mourn that the lack of “legal documentation” makes us fearful of “the stranger,” when instead we are called to follow the Biblical precedent of extending hospitality to them.

We pray for the mothers and their children, especially for their safety and their health. But we pray also for the staff that interacts with them, that their hearts will be softened and that they may have compassion on the families who have been detained, for our elected officials and candidates who call for detention rather than welcome, and for the leaders of the agencies involved with licensing of facilities and placement of families.

However, we must confess that our grief and prayers are not enough. We acknowledge that numerous injustices and violations of human rights and dignity have taken place at the BCRC. A letter from the #Shutdown Berks Coalition to Governor Wolf reports numerous human right abuses that have taken place, such as a nineteen year old woman being raped by a counselor and medical neglect of a four year old, as well as the continued trauma their detainment inflicts on them as they’ve already experienced trauma in the countries they’ve fled. The American Academy of Pediatrics has found that the detention of children “puts them at greater risk for physical and mental health problems and unnecessarily exposes [them] to additional psychological trauma.”

Jeh Johnson, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, has gone on record saying, “What we’ve been doing is ensuring the average length of stay at these (family detention) facilities is 20 days or less.” Most families at the BCRC have been there between 60 and 365 days. In late September, Senator Bob Casey joined 16 other senators, including Democratic vice presidential candidate Tim Kaine, in sending a letter to Johnson criticizing the Berks center specifically and family detention policy in general. On October 7, 2016, the Department of Homeland Security’s own Advisory Committee on Family Residential Centers recommended an immediate end to the practice of detaining Central American children and families seeking asylum in the United States, finding the practice inhumane and unnecessary.

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches recognizes that all of humanity belongs to God—regardless of country of origin—and we cannot remain silent when abuses such as those at the Berks facility are taking place within our own state. We affirm that our own foremothers and forefathers were once refugees from the land of Egypt, and that Jesus’ family fled to Egypt because of state violence. Refugee narratives and the reminder to treat “strangers” with mercy and love are essential components of our faith tradition.

We therefore commit the Pennsylvania Council of Churches to work for justice, mercy, and fair treatment of the families that reside in the Berks County Residential Center, and to stand with our sisters and brothers in faith in this work. We call upon the BCRC staff to treat the families under their care with love and respect. And finally, we urge people of faith and good will to seek ways to show mercy and love to “the stranger,” recognizing our immigrant neighbors as fellow humans and children of God rather than “undocumented” or “illegal,” and to call upon the PA Department of Human Services Secretary Ted Dallas and Governor Tom Wolf to shut down the Berks County Residential Center.

Rev. Elizabeth L. Bidgood Enders

The Rev. Elizabeth Bidgood Enders, President
Board of Directors, Pennsylvania Council of Churches

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