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Jail alternative safeguards teen aliens**3,000-mile trip from El Salvador ends in Fife facility**

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Tayo's heart is set on seeing his long-lost mom.

He's traveled more than 3,000 miles, crossing three international borders. Hopped buses so crowded he and others were stacked like pancakes. Hitched rides in trucks. Slogged through mud and rain.

The 17-year-old Salvadoran paid a "coyote" \$6,000 to smuggle him across the Mexico-Arizona border and drive him to Los Angeles. His mom, who left El Salvador for the United States when he was just a toddler, paid for the trip with money saved from her job.

But then, Los Angeles police raided the house where he slept on the floor and handed him over to immigration officials.

A month after he left home, Tayo landed not in his mother's arms, but behind locked doors in a facility for undocumented youths near Tacoma.

That's where he's been since Aug. 4, mired in the red tape of immigration laws. His real name can't be used, according to federal officials now in charge of his fate.

The Selma R. Carson House, run by the Seattle non-profit Pioneer Human Services on a \$1 million annual federal contract, is a step up from the juvenile jail where Tayo would have been detained in the past.

Carson House is this region's "semi-secure" facility for teenagers who have no adult supervision when they are picked up by immigration officials. It's less restrictive than a jail but still a locked institution.

When it opened a year ago, Carson House was the first semi-secure facility set up by the Administration for Children and Families, which took over custody of undocumented youths from the Department of Homeland Security in March 2003. A 1997 settlement in a lengthy class-action lawsuit forced federal immigration officials to stop jailing so many children.

ACF officials say facilities such as Carson House have helped them reduce the number of children who are jailed to 2 percent of those detained, compared with 30 percent when immigration officials handled custody. Critics dispute the 2 percent figure, saying the numbers are higher than that and should include youths held in locked "semi-secure" facilities as well.



zoom

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Salvadoran teen "Tayo" cradles a teddy bear given him by a staff member at a locked residential facility in Fife for undocumented children picked up by immigration authorities.

What isn't in dispute is that immigration officials are detaining an increasing number of minors -- a 30 percent increase in just a year, from 4,792 in 2003 to 6,200 this year.

The ACF's Office of Refugee Resettlement is scrambling to find enough shelters, group homes and foster homes to place the juveniles, who have numbered between 750 and 900 in recent months.

Given the pressure to find housing, federal officials are shipping detained teenagers to Carson House from all over the country.

A semi-secure facility is supposed to be for those deemed runaway risks, who need mental health treatment, or have been accused of non-violent crimes such as drug possession.

Some teens end up there because it's the only available bed.

The low-slung, concrete-block building, formerly a residence for teen offenders, is surrounded by a 10-foot wire fence far back from the street in a Fife industrial park. A visitor must buzz an intercom to gain entry to the site.

The locked doors are a deterrent, but escape is as simple as shoving open an alarmed exit. Fifteen of the 120 residents in the last year did just that.

On this particular day, 10 boys and two girls ranging in age from 15 to 17 are there. They are five Mexicans, three Hondurans, two Guatemalans, one Dominican -- plus Tayo.

They bunk in small, stark bedrooms with alarmed windows, share meals in a common area, attend a few hours of school in a makeshift classroom and do chores. A volleyball set and a sparsely equipped weight room are among the few diversions.

A mental-health therapist stops in weekly to assess new arrivals and arrange counseling for those who need it.

Staff members closely supervise the teens 24 hours a day. The residential counselors, teacher, case managers and others try to ease the teens' loneliness and boredom as best they can in such an institutional setting.

Winning their trust isn't easy, said Art Tel, the facility's director. "There's lots of fear in dealing with the system," he said.

Sometimes staff members can help track down a youth's relative somewhere in the United States who is willing to take the teen in during immigration proceedings.

Two months ago, David Walding, who works for the year-old Seattle non-profit Volunteer Advocates for Immigrant Justice, began visiting the facility weekly to sort out which teens could most benefit from legal representation.

A few are eligible to apply for asylum, a trafficking visa or a special juvenile visa for abused or abandoned youths. Walding links those teens with pro bono attorneys from Microsoft or one of six local law firms who have offered their services and help fund the project.

But with limited resources, the group can offer legal assistance only to teens with promising claims who

plan to stay in this region, he said. Only about 10 percent have qualified so far.

"It's an unfortunate reality that immigration law doesn't give kids many options," Walding said.

Often, teens chafe at being locked up and just want to go home. They appear before an immigration judge, ask for "voluntary departure" and are ushered onto a plane a few days or weeks later.

Accepting voluntary departure does not affect future applications for entry to the United States. A person who is deported must wait a decade before returning to this country or face a possible federal prison term.

The oldest of five children, he began his risky journey with the hope of easing the poverty gripping his family.

Two weeks ago, he was deported back to a life of toiling in the tomato, onion and garlic fields of his rural home.

Others are in limbo for months, waiting and wondering whether an immigration judge will order them to leave or grant them a special visa to stay.

Staff members contacted Tayo's mom after he arrived at Carson House. He'd hoped to get permission from an immigration judge to live with her until his status is sorted out. His parents are in the United States legally, but aren't allowed to sponsor their son. His four siblings are also in this country, although their legal status is unclear.

At his second court hearing, Tayo, who speaks only Spanish, got confused. He didn't understand what the judge was saying through the translator. He had no attorney.

"I got my foot stuck in my mouth," Tayo said through an interpreter. "I asked for voluntary departure by mistake."

Now, he's trying to get that decision reversed, with the help of an attorney provided by the Volunteer Advocates group.

No one is quite sure why Tayo ended up at Carson House, since he isn't a runaway risk and has no criminal history.

Like any gregarious teenager, he rebels at some Carson House rules. Not being allowed to touch other teens is especially puzzling to him. He lost some privileges recently after he and his roommate broke the sink in their room while roughhousing.

On his bedroom wall, he's spelled out the name of his girlfriend back home using scrabble letters. He misses the aunt and uncle who raised him and also playing soccer with friends.

And he's not the least bit embarrassed about the brown teddy bear sitting on his bunk, a gift from a staff member.

Asked what he likes about the United States, Tayo can't think of a single thing.

He's here for only one reason: reuniting with the mother and father whose faces he knows only through photos.

"If they send me back, I will try again," Tayo vowed.

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