

Testimony of Blanche Engochan
U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration and
Citizenship
Hearing on “the Expansion and Troubling Use of ICE Detention”
Thursday, September 26, 2019

Chairwoman Lofgren, Vice Chairwoman Jayapal, Ranking Member Buck, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship, thank you for the opportunity to speak today about my experience as an asylum seeker in the United States.

I didn't want to leave Cameroon. It was my home. And it was home to the people I loved. Like all refugees, I was forced to leave.

I decided to come to the United States. It was the obvious choice. The United States was a powerful country that would protect me. Since I was a child, I knew America welcomed people from all over the world. It would be a hard journey, but at the end of it I would, I assumed, find some safety and peace.

I never imagined that I would be placed in chains, or locked up in a crowded detention center with other traumatized women.

In February 2019, I crossed into the United States at the San Ysidro Port of Entry in San Diego, and was taken into custody. Two things stand out in my memory from this time. One is the bitter cold in my cell. The other is my bitter fear. I had no idea what would happen. For all I knew, I would never be free again.

Two weeks later, when they transported me, they put me in chains. I now know this is called five-point shackles. I didn't understand why they were treating me like a dangerous criminal. I still carry the humiliation with me.

After a brief stop in Arizona, I was taken to the Adelanto Detention Facility in California. The good news was I met with an asylum officer who gave me an idea of what was happening. The bad news was I was trapped in a cruel place.

At Adelanto, we weren't given enough food. I was hungry all the time.

And I was tired all the time. I had trouble sleeping because of the fear that I would be sent back, and because the lights didn't go out till one in the morning and we were woken up only a few hours later, between four and five a.m.

The medical staff ran tests on me two times but after the second test they never told me the results, even though I was detained for several months.

Maybe the worst thing in Adelanto was all the crying. Women crying because they were reliving trauma. Or because they had suffered new abuse. Or because they had gotten bad news in their case. The detention center is a house of tears.

I applied for parole—and was denied even though I had a sponsor. Other women had more than one sponsor and were also denied parole. There seemed to be no hope for me.

Then I applied for a lawyer. The asylum process was a mystery to me. The thought of facing a judge alone, with my life and freedom on the line—that terrified me.

I was lucky. I got a lawyer, from Human Rights First, and if not for her, I would probably still be locked up, or deported back into danger. At my hearing, the judge told me I had received asylum, and that same day, I was released from Adelanto, after six months in captivity.

I am grateful for asylum. I am living with my aunt and I am looking forward to my new life. But my painful past is still with me, and it includes the months I spent locked up in the United States.

It does not have to be this way. There are alternatives to detention that help asylum-seekers understand how to apply for asylum and where and when to show up for our hearings. Locking up refugees who seek asylum is senseless. And expensive. The cruelty costs a lot of money.

I urge you, please, use alternative-to-detention programs. Expand them. The United States, of all countries, should not treat refugees like criminals.