



Testimony of Gloria Armendariz

Committee on Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugee, Border Security, and International Law

Hearing on Problems with Immigration Detainee Medical Care June 4, 2008

My name is Gloria Armendariz. I am a United States citizen and I reside in San Antonio, Texas with Isaias Vasquez, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico when he was 2 years old, served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, and recently became a naturalized U.S. citizen. I have lived with Isaias for over 30 years. After many years of suffering from mental illness, he was diagnosed in 1990 with schizophrenia. Isaias was hospitalized over 18 times at the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Veteran's Hospital (VA) in San Antonio, Texas. He was also hospitalized and received treatment for schizophrenia at the North Texas State Hospital following an arrest for possession of marijuana.

Isaias's conviction for drug possession led to his detention and removal proceedings in November, 2004 by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Until August, 2005, he was detained in San Antonio at the GEO facility. I visited Isaias every week while he was detained in San Antonio, and a number of times I was concerned that he was not receiving adequate medical attention. Isaias complained that he was having side effects from the medication he received and was fainting. He said that the detention staff did not believe he was mentally ill or had fainted. On two occasions I learned he fell and hit his head. When I complained to the detention staff I was told that Isaias was fine and did not need additional medical attention.

In August, 2005, Isaias won his immigration case when the Immigration Judge granted his application under the Convention Against Torture. The judge found that Isaias would likely suffer torture in Mexico due to his mental illness. DHS did not appeal the judge's decision, but, Isaias was not released and was instead transferred to the South Texas Detention Complex at Pearsall, Texas. There his condition became much worse. I was unable to see Isaias as often because of the distance from San Antonio to Pearsall, but Isaias complained that he was not receiving his medication, that he was not fed properly and that he was being punished and put in segregation. When I saw him he was frail and undernourished. He seemed unstable and disoriented. A few times I tried to see Isaias, but I was told that he did not want to see me.

In January, 2006 I learned that DHS believed Isaias did not have schizophrenia and it was trying to get the Immigration Judge to rescind the order allowing Isaias to stay in the United States. Later I found out that in November, 2005 the medical staff at the detention center diagnosed Isaias with "unspecified personality disorder", and that thereafter, they decided to take Isaias off his medication for schizophrenia and depression. Isaias became very sick and was put on suicide watch. He smeared feces and spit in his cell. He became very disorientated and refused his other medication for diabetes and high blood pressure. He was punished by the detention staff- they put him in solitary confinement and gassed him.

I tried the best I could to get help for Isaias. Our immigration lawyer made requests to DHS to release Isaias. I called Advocacy Inc., an organization which helps individuals with disabilities. I spoke to the detention center warden, contacted my congressman's office, and filed complaints with the FBI.

Suddenly, in May, 2006 DHS our lawyer was told that Isaias was being released. I drove to Pearsall, Texas to get him and I was stunned at his condition when I got there. Isaias was very thin, his feet were swollen, he was covered with sores and he was ranting. I was afraid of him because he was so sick, and I asked the doctor, Dr. Johnson, to transfer Isaias to the VA hospital. He refused and said that Isaias was not sick. So, I drove him straight to the VA hospital in San Antonio. I learned when we got there that Dr. Johnson had called to the VA and told the staff that there was nothing wrong with Isaias. So, at first the VA would not admit him, even though for many years he had been treated for schizophrenia at that hospital. I refused to take him home, and when Isaias became violent, the VA staff had to subdue him and he was finally admitted to the psychiatric ward. Isaias remained at the VA hospital for several weeks and was put back on the medications which had been discontinued at Pearsall.

On January 30, 2007 at a hearing with the Immigration Judge, DHS agreed to dismiss the removal case so Isaias could apply for naturalization. On September 27, 2007 Isaias was granted naturalization based on his military service. Now, he has his good and bad days, but he still suffers from the memories of his treatment at Pearsall.