

March 24, 2022

Lisa Anderson  
Assistant Deputy Minister  
BC Corrections  
Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General

**Re: The government of BC should stop CBSA from incarcerating immigration detainees in provincial jails**

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I arrived in Canada in late 2012, and CBSA arrested and detained me the day after I made a refugee claim. The officers came to the Welcome Centre in Vancouver where I was staying, they asked me to step outside and arrested me as soon as my feet were off the premises of the Welcome Centre.

The CBSA officer that was handling my case was aggressive and accused me of lying. He told me to “get ready to be deported” because they deport “98% of Mexicans.” He decided that I was a liar and undeserving of protection before even hearing my story. I never refused to cooperate with CBSA, and I answered every question I was asked. My refugee claim was eventually approved and today I’m living and working in BC as a Permanent Resident.

I am making this submission because I believe that Canadians can and must do better to welcome people who come to this country in search of protection or a better life.

When I was detained in 2012, CBSA transferred me to the Allouette Correctional Centre for Women in Maple Ridge. I was aware that it was a maximum-security jail, and I was terrified. I was treated in the same way as all the other detainees – whether on immigration hold or for criminal charges or convictions. I felt that I had just turned into a number, an inmate, a faceless nobody.

I remember that there were some fights between some of the detainees. I remember one woman tried to take her own life in the shower; she cut her wrists and her blood was everywhere. No one explained the rules to me and there was no interpretation support. As an inmate, you were expected to automatically know the rules and abide by them all, or risk being punished.

At the jail, I asked for mental health support, but there was no interpreter available. I met representatives from the Canadian Red Cross, but I received no support from them. They just asked me some questions, but I felt they could not do anything meaningful to help me.

The first time I had a chance to speak with my lawyer, she told me, “Your detention is a mistake.” These words brought me so much relief because I felt that finally someone believed me. Finally, someone recognized the injustice I was experiencing. I felt heard. But these words were also agonizing because they confirmed to me that Canada was not the north star that I hoped it would

be. My lawyer told me that the CBSA officers and the tribunal adjudicators were not reading the full statement I submitted for my refugee claim.

I was in immigration detention for about three months. But at the time, I never knew when I would be released. I met one woman in jail who was also detained on immigration hold, and she had been there for six months. I met another woman who was simply waiting for authorities from her country of nationality to send her identity documents, waiting out a cross-border bureaucratic procedure in jail. I understood that CBSA wanted to keep me in jail until my refugee claim was completed, on the assumption that my claim would fail. At my final detention review hearing, I was afraid to believe that I would be released because my hope had been crushed already.

I was released from detention nearly a decade ago. But it never feels very far. Hearing the sound of key jangling takes me right back to the jail, with guards on their rounds. I can't wear jewelry on my wrists or green clothes, because it reminds me of being handcuffed in my green jail uniform. Bright lights remind me of the harsh constant light in jail. When I see a border officer, I start shaking and I have panic attacks. I spent thousands of dollars on years in therapy.

The same year I was released from detention, a woman named Lucia Vega Jimenez took her life in immigration detention. She was from Mexico like me. I was detained in the same CBSA facility in BC where Lucia took her life. I was also detained in the same jail in BC where Lucia spent her last two weeks. I came close to losing my opportunity to find safety in this country, and I came close to losing hope. Lucia was not as lucky. Lucia's story broke my heart. And it hurts to think about how many others may lose their hope, their faith in Canada, and even their lives, because of immigration detention.

Back home in Mexico, I was persecuted for investigating human rights abuses. In Canada, I experienced them firsthand. While I was in detention, I kept thinking, "how can I find safety in this country if I was sent to jail for nothing? How can I trust authorities here?"

I believe in a better Canada. Today, I work as an Outreach and Intake Supervisor at the Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture (VAST). In this capacity, I support many refugee claimants and newcomers, including people who were in immigration detention. Many of them come to this country with the same hope I had, and I work to pave a better way for them. I feel a responsibility to protect them. I want to pay forward the kindness that was shown to me by those who helped me find my way despite the injustice of immigration detention during my first few months in Canada. Being a refugee is not an option; it's just a circumstance.

Canada has the opportunity to become the place we know it could be – a country that treats all people with compassion and humanity. I implore the BC government to stop allowing CBSA to incarcerate immigration detainees in provincial jails.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, written in a cursive style. The signature appears to read "Sara Maria Gomez Lopez".

Sara Maria Gomez Lopez, B.Sc (Psyc)