

Churches, local leaders defeat plan to build prison for immigrants

Hundreds of people awaiting deportation hearings would have been incarcerated in Elkhart County, Indiana.

by [Marshall V. King](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue



Richard Aguirre, Marilyn Torres, and Marbella Chavez, co-coordinators of the Coalition Against the Elkhart County Immigration Detention Center, on January 27, 2018, celebrating their defeat of a for-profit prison proposal. Photo by Marshall V. King.

When Mike Yoder, a county commissioner in northern Indiana, learned about plans for a private prison nearby that would have a contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement to house people from a six-state region in the Midwest, he went to his pastor.

“At the time, somewhat joking, I said the only positive I can see in it is it’s not as far to drive to protest,” said Jeremy Shue, pastor of Silverwood Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana.

Yoder learned of CoreCivic's interest in Elkhart County in September. The company, formerly called Corrections Corporation of America, was seeking county approval to build a prison on a piece of land near the county jail and two landfills. The final decision would fall to Yoder and just two other commissioners, the chief executive officers of the county.

The proposed facility would have cost \$100 million or more to build, providing 800 to 1,400 beds for people convicted of felonies and awaiting deportation hearings, Yoder said.

Yoder met with CoreCivic officials and other county leaders, but few knew of the proposal until mid-November, when Yoder asked Shue to invite a dozen pastors to a meeting. Yoder hoped people of faith might minister to those imprisoned at the facility.

"What I envisioned the faith community helping us do was keep everybody calm," said Yoder, who didn't believe he had a legal reason to oppose this facility on this piece of land.

What he didn't perhaps account for was how people of faith had already been supporting immigrants in the community. "It hit a nerve," said Shue of Yoder's news.

Several days before the November 16 meeting of pastors, the city of Goshen, the county seat, had unveiled a Goshen resident ID card which would be issued to give all residents a form of legal identification. This had grown out of two years of efforts by Richard Aguirre, a local activist and the director of corporate and foundation relations for Goshen College, and others in the community. A coalition called Elkhart County Helping Our People Everywhere had formed to provide support, along with another group committed to helping immigrants in practical ways, such as driving to appointments or connecting to resources.

A rally had been planned for November 18, several days after the pastors' meeting, to celebrate the ID cards. Aguirre quickly shifted the focus of the rally. The day of the pastors' meeting, he created a social media group for the Coalition Against the Elkhart County Immigration Detention Center. It had several hundred positive responses within hours. The rally, despite cold rain, drew more than 300 people.

Shue and others also met with Hispanic pastors to hear their thoughts.

“In that meeting, it was immediately apparent [that] in the Hispanic community, it was just outright panic,” Shue said. The prospect of ICE being in the community concerned some and terrified others. “Just that presence struck a fear into the immigrants in our midst. All of them, not even just the undocumented ones.”

Shue said he believes Jesus calls us to welcome the immigrant. He’s also morally opposed to for-profit prisons. He didn’t believe the prison was a good fit for the community, and when he heard the Hispanic pastors’ response, he was even more sure of his opposition.

José Luis Gutiérrez, pastor of Comunidad Cristiana Adulam, had tried for the past 14 years to bring together Hispanic churches in the Goshen area for worship or activities, and only five or six congregations would gather. This time, 20 Hispanic churches responded in opposition to the proposed facility. “We found common ground,” he said.

Despite the holiday season, the movement grew. An ecumenical prayer vigil in Elkhart on December 16 attracted more than 200 people. More than 3,600 joined the Facebook group.

Hundreds of people wrote letters and emails to Yoder and the other two county commissioners, Suzanne Weirick and Frank Lucchese. Lucchese said 98 percent of the feedback he received opposed the facility. Yet all three were struggling with how they would vote if the proposal reached them in March.

The coalition called a press conference for January 16, the day prior to CoreCivic and ICE officials making a private presentation to local business leaders. Those speaking at the press conference were clear about their opposition. By the end of the meeting on January 17, business leaders told CoreCivic to leave the community. On January 18, Goshen mayor Jeremy Stutsman, who had been outspoken about his opposition, released a letter outlining how the prison would hurt the community. It was cosigned by many of those same business leaders from the county’s largest employers.

On January 22, CoreCivic withdrew its proposal.

“If the coalition hadn’t done what it did, I don’t think the other things would have happened,” Aguirre said.

Not every pastor or church member in the community opposed the facility. Shue told Yoder from the pulpit to vote against the proposal, but other pastors didn't speak publicly because their congregations weren't of one mind.

"The speed at which the faith community responded was very unique and very impressive," said Lisa Koop, associate director of legal services at the National Immigrant Justice Center and a Goshen resident. "In this community, we give a lot of weight to the opinions of our faith leaders and they serve as moral authority, and that played a critical role here."

This is the seventh time since 2011 a community within a few hours' travel time from Chicago has turned away a for-profit prison, said Fred Tsao, policy director for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

Hispanic Christians felt supported in new ways by English-speaking congregations, Gutiérrez said. "We're not aliens anymore."

Yoder is concerned that ICE may retaliate with raids on undocumented workers in the community. Early in the process, he had asked, "What if God's saying he wanted it here?" Now, he said with a laugh, "everyone else discerned that God didn't want it here." —*Christian Century*

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