

What's the problem with NORCOR?

Lawsuits, political resistance, immigrant rights and the state's sanctuary law are forming a perfect storm over the Northern Oregon Regional Corrections Facilities

BY THACHER SCHMID
STAFF WRITER

Charles, the manager of a Hood River restaurant, wants his sous chef back. When Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents detained an undocumented Mexican immigrant who had worked as his sous chef for a decade, Charles recalled, there was no drama. It was 6 a.m. on a June morning, and the agents simply showed up, flashed their badges and asked for the man.

When he came out of the kitchen, Charles said, he was taken to the Northern Oregon Regional Corrections Facilities, or NORCOR, a jail in The Dalles serving Wasco, Hood River, Sherman and Gilliam counties, then on to the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma.

Just like that, said Charles, who declined to share his last name, business name or employee's name due to concerns about retaliation, the restaurant was without its No. 2 kitchen employee — right before the start of the summer tourism season.

Charles described the 20-year employee as “a great leader (who was) conscientious, hardworking, creative and solid, even-tempered.” But the employee also had an apparent problem with drunk driving: he had been arrested in December on his second DUI, Charles says; the first happened 20 years ago. Due to the length of time between offenses, Charles said, he was eligible for and entered a diversion program, and was using a Breathalyzer to start his car.

“He was attending meetings, doing everything he was supposed to be doing,” Charles said. “This interrupted that. It's been very disruptive.”

The facility where the sous chef was first taken, and which regularly holds about 20 detainees from ICE, is now at the center of a gathering storm. A coalition of activists,

legal groups, nonprofits and the state Democratic party are taking up the fight over the undocumented immigrants at NORCOR, which an ICE spokeswoman said is one of two facilities in Oregon that hold its detainees.

It's a story which Street Roots first covered in May, and since then the facility has become ground zero for the battle over Oregon's status as a “sanctuary” state.

“We hope to be an example for other communities around the state to basically stand up and protect their immigrant communities,” said Tim Schechtel, a vinculturalist and member of Gorge ICE Resistance.

On June 25, the Democratic Party of Oregon approved a resolution that says NORCOR is “in violation of basic principles of human rights” and seeks to create a task force to oversee jails statewide. Less than a month later, on July 21, the Oregon Law Center filed a lawsuit against the facility on behalf of four Wasco County taxpayers for “misuse of public funds” because of its contract with the U.S. Marshals Service and ICE. That suit seeks, among other things, a “permanent injunction” against NORCOR's holding of ICE detainees.

On Sept. 12, the ACLU of Oregon sent a scathing letter describing “inhumane” conditions at NORCOR and threatened a separate lawsuit. Meanwhile, a petition by the Rural Organizing Project calls for the immediate termination of the contract between NORCOR and ICE, and the facility is the site of daily protests by the Gorge ICE Resistance.

“I think there will be continued pressure to see what kind of oversight the state will have on the treatment of those who are detained there,” said Jeanne Atkins, Chair of the Democratic Party of Oregon, “and what relationship NORCOR would have with ICE.”

While the battlefield may be courtrooms,

political arenas and protests, a coalition opposing NORCOR's holding of undocumented immigrants for ICE raises the broader human question of whether ICE detainees are, in the words of the Rev. John Boonstra, “forgotten people.” Boonstra is a member of the Gorge Ecumenical Ministries, a group of clergy who have been regularly visiting detainees in NORCOR. The coalition also includes Gorge ICE Resistance, ACLU, Rural Organizing Project, Pinos y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), Oregon Law Center and others.

Coalition members say detainees, who are dressed in dark green, suffer deplorable conditions while kept at NORCOR far longer than alleged criminals, dressed in orange. They say they're not afforded basic rights, can't be visited by family, and are moved back and forth between Tacoma and the Dalles to prevent organizing or speaking to media.

ICE spokeswoman Virginia Kice stated in an email that NORCOR and the Josephine County Jail accept “aliens” from the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma “on a very limited basis.”

However, jail administrator Bryan Brandenburg described NORCOR as a progressive institution with high standards, and said the facility has taken immigration holds since 2000. (According to the Oregon Law Center's lawsuit, NORCOR has taken immigration holds via a contract with the U.S. Marshals Service dated November 1, 2014, and with ICE since April 2015.)

Brandenburg “categorically” denied the assertions in the ACLU's 15-page demand letter, describing them as “false.” In a response letter, he noted “we have sufficient documentation to prove they are invalid.”

He said he would prefer the four-county jail cover its budget deficit with a bond measure rather than by continuing to take ICE holds. He said making “Dreamers” — young undocumented immigrants in the

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program — U.S. citizens is “the right thing to do.” He portrays NORCOR as having drawn a line in the sand with ICE, and said the jail has actually sent detainees back to Tacoma because they had no criminal history.

“We have people who have a criminal history and are here illegally,” Brandenburg said. “Folks that are just here illegally, I don't want anything to do with them, and I've made that clear to folks who are sending people to me.”

Meanwhile, with tougher enforcement policies under the Trump administration, immigration arrests have risen 40 percent in the past year compared to the previous year.

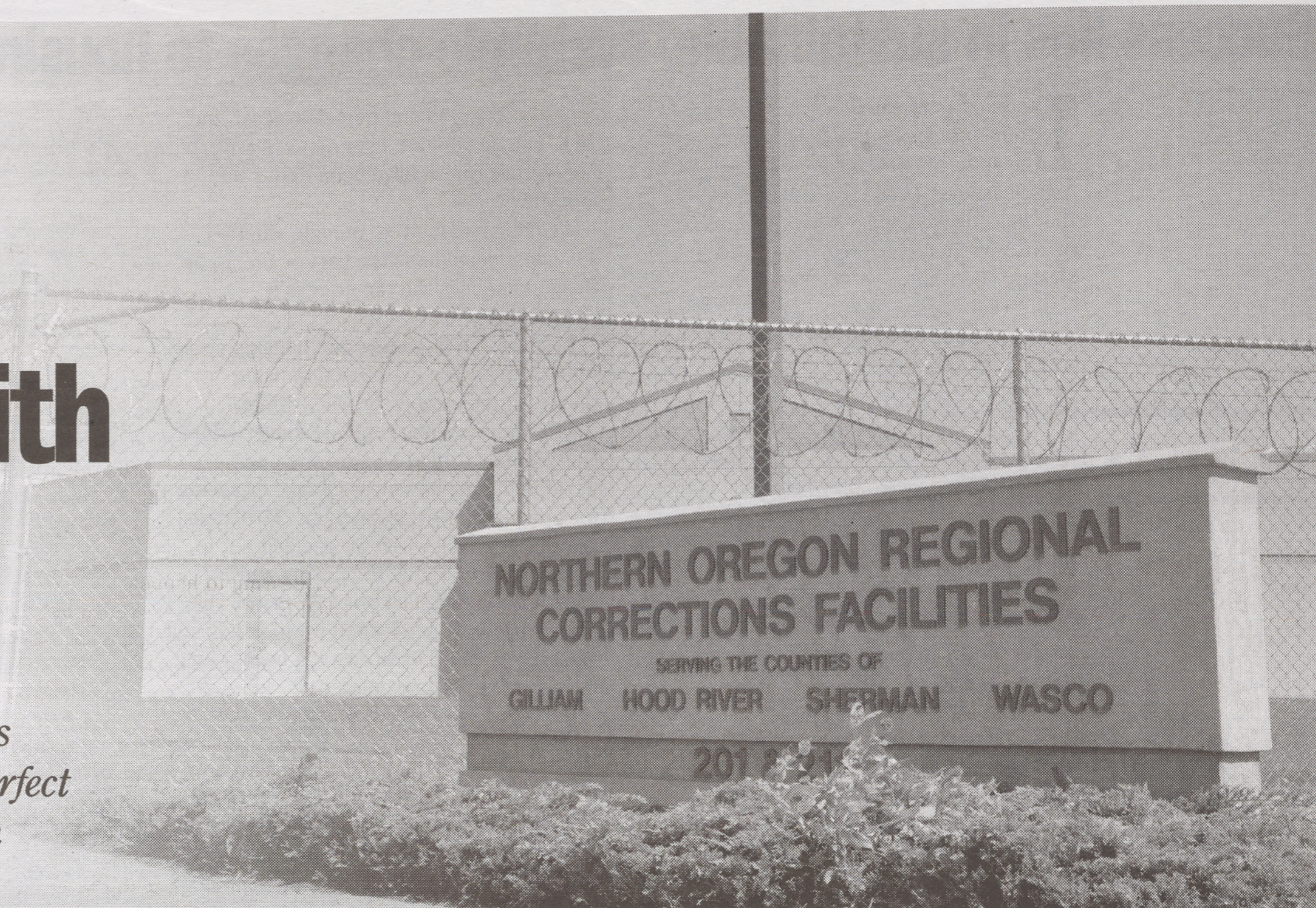
“The bottom line is that this is big business,” said Ramon Ramirez, president of PCUN. “Private prison corporations are making profits.”

Other companies are tapped in, too. Telmate, recently bought by GTL, which calls itself “the corrections innovation leader,” charges detainees 25 cents a minute for phone calls at NORCOR. The same company charges only 16 cents a minute at Oregon Department of Corrections facilities, and the cost has been controversial even at that rate.

If you listen to Gov. Kate Brown or Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler, you'll hear foreign-born persons here without proper authority described as “undocumented immigrants.” ICE spokeswoman Virginia Kice, on the other hand, refers to ICE detainees as “aliens,” while U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, in his recent Portland visit, spoke of “criminal aliens.”

ICE Acting Director Thomas Homan, like Attorney General Sessions, also uses the term “criminal aliens” to describe those in

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