



FIRST
AMENDMENT
COALITION

California News Publishers Association



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VIA PORTAL

Honorable Thomas Umberg
Chair, Senate Judiciary Committee
1021 O Street, Suite 3240
Sacramento, CA 95814

SUPPORT | SB 423 — Detention Facility Transparency Act (Gonzalez)

Chair Umberg and Members of the Committee:

The First Amendment Coalition and 13 press organizations write in strong support of SB 423, Senator Lena Gonzalez' Detention Facility Transparency Act, which would amend the California Public Records Act to require local agencies to release 911 calls and related records from private detention facilities in California.

This bill is a necessary and urgently needed transparency measure to ensure that the public, journalists, policymakers, and state and local officials can better understand what is happening inside privately operated detention facilities. Recent reports make it clear why transparency is vital. At one Southern California detention center, detainees have [described conditions](#) in which “disease and illness are rampant, mold grows on the walls, and detained individuals are denied sufficient food, clean drinking water, proper medical care, and disability accommodations.” At another, a court-appointed monitor [recently found](#) that ICE is failing to provide adequate healthcare, “placing individuals at serious risk of both immediate and long-term harm.”

Privately run detention facilities operate within California and confine people pursuant to government authority, yet much of what occurs inside these facilities remains hidden from public view. The need for more transparency is especially acute given that the number of people — approximately 6,400 — being held in privately run civil detention centers in California every day has nearly doubled since early 2025. Those detained include long-term California residents, asylum seekers and, at times, U.S. citizens mistakenly placed in immigration detention. Many are held for lengthy periods; the average length of detention in some California facilities exceeded 100 days in 2025.

Journalists have been tirelessly pursuing stories about what occurs in detention. And for good reason. Between September 2025 and March 2026, there were [six deaths](#) at two facilities in California. Recently, ICE [announced](#) that it will no longer report the deaths of detainees who have recently been released from custody – even if the cause of death could have been an illness or incident that occurred inside the facility. Numerous reports of [inhumane](#) conditions, [medical neglect](#), [mistreatment](#) and [sexual violence](#) underscore the need for greater transparency and oversight.

Journalists trying to document these important stories in California often face barriers to public records. For example, a 2026 [CalMatters](#) investigation found a rise in reports of rape and other sexual violence at the Otay Mesa detention facility in San Diego County. The limited amount of public records made available showed that in 2025 there were 159 calls for service, 21 of them related to the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act, with seven of those alleging rape. When journalists tried to uncover more information, the sheriff's department refused to release recordings of the 911 calls or the full dispatch log, stating that the records were exempt as they were records of a law enforcement investigation, even though a contract revealed that the sheriff had ceded control of the investigations to private administrators employed by the for-profit prison contractor. Reporters at other news organizations have experienced similar barriers to crucial information. The San Bernardino Sun this year reported a [sixfold increase](#) in 911 calls from Adelanto's detention center. But when the reporter sought to understand specific incidents in greater detail, the sheriff's department withheld the information citing the investigatory records exemption.

SB 423 addresses this gap by making disclosure of 911 call records in this context mandatory rather than discretionary. Existing law already allows or requires local agencies to disclose these records under the California Public Records Act, or CPRA. SB 423 does not affect that existing framework. But the public's right to know should not depend on inconsistent local practices or discretionary withholding. When a private detention facility generates emergency calls to local agencies, those records should be accessible to the public, subject to appropriate safeguards.

The bill also balances transparency with legitimate privacy and law enforcement concerns. SB 423 includes safeguards to protect names of victims and allows an agency to withhold certain information when there is an active investigation and disclosure would substantially interfere with that investigation, and when disclosure would pose a significant danger to the physical safety of a person. These protections ensure that transparency does not come at the expense of victim privacy or legitimate investigative or safety needs. Amendments taken in August narrow the scope of the bill while maintaining the core provisions that will create more oversight and accountability.

News coverage from around the country shows why more transparency is in the public interest:

- This year, the Associated Press obtained more than [one hundred](#) 911 calls from Camp East Montana in Texas, the largest detention center in the country, which revealed “overcrowding, medical neglect, malnutrition and emotional distress.” Each call, the AP wrote, was its own tale of “pain and despair.”
- In Arizona this year, [audio of a 911 call](#) from an overcrowded ICE facility revealed that officers had pepper sprayed 47 detainees in an enclosed room, resulting in one man having a seizure.
- In Florida, transcripts of [911 calls](#) from an ICE facility showed how medical staff were struggling to help a patient: “We did everything we could but we’re not well equipped,” an official told a dispatcher.
- And across the country, [911 calls](#) revealed alarming incidents of self-harm happening under the watch of detention officials: one detainee swallowed a razor blade, another drank cleaning chemicals, three cut their own wrists.

The same level of transparency is urgently needed in California, where seven facilities have a capacity of more than 9,000 beds. SB 423 is a modest, targeted and necessary step toward greater transparency and accountability. It will allow journalists covering the impact of immigration enforcement to better perform their watchdog roles and inform the public and policymakers about events of immense concern.

The First Amendment Coalition is proud to co-sponsor this bill with Immigrant Defense Advocates. We respectfully request your “aye” vote.

FIRST AMENDMENT COALITION



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