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Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas, were among community members at a Feb. 2 hearing of the Leavenworth Planning Commission about a proposed permit request by a nonprofit detention center to operate an ICE detention facility for undocumented immigrants. The sisters say CoreCivic has a history of not treating immigrants with dignity. (Joe Kenny)



by Joe Kenny

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Leavenworth, Kansas — February 11, 2026

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A detention center under contract with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency in Leavenworth, Kansas, is a step away from opening despite objections from the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth and other community members.

The Leavenworth Planning Commission voted 5-1 Feb. 2 to approve a special use permit request by CoreCivic to operate a 1,000-bed ICE detention facility for undocumented immigrants.

The former federal prison in the city operated by CoreCivic was closed in 2021 by the U.S. Justice Department after an audit found understaffing, chronic violence, lack of local law enforcement access and repeated sewer system problems.

In her address to the commission opposing the new facility, Sister of Charity Jean Anne Panisko cited CoreCivic's previous lack of cooperation with the city. She said the cost and oversight of municipal services and public safety would fall on the city of Leavenworth while the economic benefits are limited and unstable. "This is a financial liability for a small city and it is incompatible with the quality of life of the city's citizens," she said.

Panisko also said reports of problems at CoreCivic facilities in California show that human dignity and care are not part of the company's core values. "As Sisters of Charity, we believe that all decisions, especially those that affect people, should uphold human dignity, the stewardship of resources and the common good," she said.



CoreCivic is a private company seeking to reopen a detention facility in Leavenworth, Kansas, as a detention center for undocumented immigrants. (Joe Kenny)

John Shively, executive director of mission at the Sisters of Charity, described CoreCivic as poor partners with the city by not maintaining equipment and straining emergency services. "I don't think we can trust CoreCivic at its word," Shively said.

More than nine Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth were among those at the hearing, some watching a video feed set up in a hallway for the overflow crowd. Sr. Vickie Perkins told NCR that the religious community believes every human should be treated with dignity. "I truly believe God doesn't want this. This is not how we treat people," she said.

Katie Frandsen, a parishioner from St. Francis de Sales in nearby Lansing, told NCR that Jesus and church teaching calls people to the margins "and the margins are clearly the immigrant influx. They are due rights; everyone has rights. These are people and we are called to protect and take care of them."

CoreCivic officials answered questions from the commission members, pledging to allow the city access, acknowledging the previous operation fell short and pledging to do better. They agreed with changes in the permit agreement to install a new sewer pump before opening, decrease the agreement from five to three years, and replace wording that allowed city access to the property from a "reasonable time" with notice to within two business days after written notice.

Previously, commission members had questioned a provision that stated police would be allowed access on the property "promptly"since that was vague; in its past operation, they said, a death in the prison went unreported for six days.

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Several CoreCivic employees testified to the company's training, professionalism and commitment to treating people with dignity. They also said the company benefited the community by providing about 300 jobs.

But Leavenworth residents and a few others cited the group's poor track record in Leavenworth and elsewhere. One person predicted excessive costs to the city from protesters and ICE agents who may come to the city.

The Leavenworth City Commission is expected to consider the issue Feb. 24, with a final vote March 10. The city and company have traded lawsuits over the issue, and at a Kansas Court of Appeals hearing Feb. 10 CoreCivic sought an end to an injunction requiring local approval.

The Kansas City metro area, about 35 miles from Leavenworth, has sites that also are being considered as ICE facilities, including a warehouse in Kansas City, Missouri.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.