

# Florida to use shuttered prison as 2nd immigration detention center after ‘Alligator Alcatraz’

The state plans to spend up to \$6 million to stand up Baker Correctional Institution to hold more than 1,300 people awaiting deportation.

“We have reached the point where we need additional capacity,” Gov. Ron DeSantis said during a press conference held just outside the prison. | Evan Vucci/AP

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TALLAHASSEE, Florida — Gov. Ron DeSantis announced Thursday that the state will open a second immigration detention center inside a now-shuttered state prison in North Florida as the fate of its first such facility in the Everglades lies in the hands of a federal judge.

Florida plans to spend up to \$6 million to stand up Baker Correctional Institution — which is 15 minutes away from an airport in Lake City — to hold more than 1,300 people awaiting deportation. Baker was “temporarily closed” amid ongoing staffing problems in the state prison system.

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Florida has aimed to lead state and local governments in aiding mass deportation efforts being carried out by President Donald Trump and has pushed to create immigration detention centers. It set up its first center, known as “Alligator Alcatraz,” earlier this year.

DeSantis had previously said the state was looking to set up a second center at Camp Blanding, the main training facility for the Florida National Guard located in North

Florida. But state officials decided instead that it would be cheaper and more efficient to use the closed state prison. The new center, which is being called “Deportation Depot,” is expected to be operational in about two weeks.

“We have reached the point where we need additional capacity,” DeSantis said during a press conference held outside the prison. “The reason for this is not just to house people indefinitely. We want to process, stage and then return illegal aliens to their home country.”

This summer, Florida — under DeSantis’ emergency powers — [quickly commandeered an air landing strip owned by Miami-Dade County and turned it into “Alligator Alcatraz.”](#) The state spent tens of millions to set up temporary housing units in the Everglades. Trump toured the center right before its July opening.

Environmental groups, as well as the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, want the facility to be temporarily shut down, alleging they should have been consulted about ecological effects on the area, which includes the federally protected Big Cypress National Preserve. U.S. District Judge Kathleen Williams, an appointee of former President Barack Obama, just wrapped up hearings on the group’s lawsuit.

Williams on Aug. 7 [ordered that construction work be halted](#) at “Alligator Alcatraz” for the next two weeks.

DeSantis, who said there are currently about 1,000 people housed in the Everglades facility, brushed aside a question Thursday on whether the state was moving ahead with a center in North Florida due to the litigation. He did lash out at Williams, who previously held state Attorney General James Uthmeier in civil contempt for not following an order halting enforcement of a Florida immigration law.

“It’s obvious this judge is hostile,” DeSantis told reporters. “It’s a political thing.”

DeSantis made it clear that if Williams does rule against the state over “Alligator Alcatraz,” Florida will quickly appeal the ruling and seek it to have it stayed.

Baker was one of a handful of state prisons closed in 2021 as state corrections officials struggled to find enough employees to guard prisoners. The situation got so dire that the state eventually brought in members of the Florida National Guard to help.

That arrangement ended this summer. But state officials said that the National Guard will be used to staff the new center, not correctional officers.

Kevin Guthrie, the executive director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management responsible for helping set up the center, said that the Baker site and a couple of other prisons had always been on the state’s “radar” as possible locations.

As part of the work to get it ready to open, the state will bring in air-conditioning units to pump in chilled air. He said that state law does not require air-conditioning in its prisons, but federal standards call for detainees to be in a climate-controlled location.

“A building that’s been dormant now for a couple of years is going to have some unforeseen challenges,” Guthrie acknowledged in getting the prison ready for detainees.

Florida has been paying for the creation of the new detention centers on its own, but it has been promised more than \$600 million in grant funds by the federal government to cover the cost. A spokesperson for Guthrie did not immediately respond to a question as to whether Florida has gotten any money back yet.