



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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**Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)
*Oversight of ICE Detention Facilities: Examining ICE Contractors' Response to
COVID-19***

July 13, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought illness and death to communities across our country, with more than 135,000 Americans losing their lives to the coronavirus. My home state is not exempt. Over 1,200 of my fellow Mississippians have tragically succumbed to the pandemic, and cases continue to increase.

This suffering has fallen disproportionately on minority communities, who often lack access to adequate healthcare. Those who reside in congregate settings, including detention facilities, are also particularly vulnerable. Even before the pandemic, many ICE detention facilities had a troubled record, with numerous complaints lodged about health and safety issues, poor living conditions, and inadequate inspections.

These issues, combined with the risk of infection in any crowded spaces, can lead to outbreaks inside detention facilities. By the most recent reporting, thousands of ICE detainees across more than 70 detention facilities have tested positive for COVID-19. This unfortunately includes 35 detainees at the Karnes Family Residential Center in Karnes City, Texas, which is operated by the GEO Group. This situation cannot continue.

ICE and its contractors must do their part to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the interest of saving lives and protecting our country. I thank the witnesses for their replies to my April 29 letters requesting information on how they are mitigating the spread of COVID-19 in their facilities. However, I would note the productions have only been partially responsive.

I hope today to get a clear commitment from each company to be more transparent about their practices and what they are seeing in their facilities during this public health crisis. ICE has been publicly reporting on the numbers of affected detainees and federal employees, but a major gap in this reporting remains the number of contract personnel who have tested positive for COVID-19. The public deserves to know this information.

The DHS Inspector General also recently issued an initial report informed by surveys distributed to facilities across ICE's detention network. Those surveys allowed facilities to self-assess their preparedness and response to the pandemic, but there appeared to be a disconnect between issued guidance and implementation of that guidance.

Similarly, my staff found serious implementation gaps when reviewing the documents each of your companies provided in response to my request. We have seen public reporting and heard from whistleblowers concerned about how ICE private contractors are managing this situation.

I ask for unanimous consent to enter into the record a letter from the Government Accountability Project, which represents multiple whistleblowers who are alarmed by LaSalle Corrections' operations at the Richwood Correctional Center in Louisiana. The Government Accountability Project also represents subject matter experts who were employed by DHS to advise on detention health issues but whose input seems to have been ignored. The letter describes extremely concerning mismanagement that no doubt has made the crisis unfolding in ICE detention facilities that much worse. This is not the end of this Committee's oversight of conditions at ICE detention facilities during COVID-19.

Even before the pandemic, the Committee was actively examining persistent problems at these facilities. That work will continue. Today I urge each one of ICE's detention contractors to be more aggressive in their response to COVID-19.

I also hope that as the tragic public health crisis continues that ICE will use its discretion and maximize the use of the Alternatives to Detention Program, which the GEO Group has managed for years, to limit the spread of COVID-19 in detention. I urge our witnesses to re-examine how they have approached the problem of COVID-19 within their facilities and to continue their engagement with us to improve these conditions.

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