



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## Hearing Statement of Border Security, Facilitation, & Operations Subcommittee Chairwoman Kathleen Rice (D-NY)

### *Oversight of ICE Detention Facilities: Examining ICE Contractors' Response to COVID-19*

July 13, 2020

Today, this Subcommittee meets to examine the response to COVID-19 by four of the private contractors responsible for managing facilities in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's detention network. As coronavirus cases continue to spike nationwide, we must ensure that the contractors our government relies on are taking every step they can to minimize the spread of COVID-19 among workers and detainees.

For Fiscal Year 2020, Congress appropriated approximately \$3.1 billion for more than 45,000 single adult and family ICE detention beds and other custody operations. Over 80 percent of these beds are operated daily by private contractors, some of who are at this hearing today. That is a large amount of taxpayer money, which is funding a historically high number of detention beds – and it demands oversight and accountability.

Detention facilities must be held to a high standard at all times, but in this moment, it is of vital importance. And yet, over the past few months, it is clear that ICE and its contractors have not taken this outbreak seriously and have not treated it aggressively enough. More than three thousand detainees, 280 contractors, and at least 45 ICE employees assigned to detention facilities have now tested positive for COVID-19. Sadly, we have lost at least two detainees and five contractors due to complications from the coronavirus after exposure at detention facilities.

Despite these horrific losses, ICE is continuing normal operations and contractors are following in lock step. ICE continues to transfer detainees between facilities and contractors continue to accept them. Further, there is overwhelming evidence that these transfers have likely contributed to multiple COVID-19 outbreaks inside of ICE detention facilities across the United States.

We've also read reports and heard from current and former employees that guidance issued by the four companies represented here today suggested rationing of personal protective equipment. While documents provided to the Committee show that management at a few facilities are attempting to practice social distancing, the clearest way to prevent the spread of this disease in facilities is to pursue alternatives to detention and release those detainees who pose no threat to communities.

The high risk of exposure to COVID-19 at these facilities is further exacerbated by inadequate medical care. Prior to the pandemic, health services provided in detention facilities were severely lacking and proved to be the source of most complaints by detainees. So it is no surprise that the current public health crisis has only compounded that situation. Some facilities are reportedly waiting days or weeks to test individuals, including the most vulnerable detainees.

The bottom line is that much more needs to be done to stop the spread of the coronavirus at these facilities. To protect the health of both detainees and the American people, guidance to facility personnel must be clear and explicit; transfers between facilities must be stopped immediately; and adequate medical care must be provided. COVID-19 does not distinguish between U.S. citizens and non-citizens and neither should we in our approach to protect against it.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about what additional steps they will take to address this pressing issue going forward.

# # #

Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978