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Members of Congress Seek Answers From Prisoner Transport Company

Three members of Congress are demanding information about abuse and deaths aboard the private vans that transport prisoners around the country. The written request was sent Wednesday from senators Elizabeth Warren and Cory Booker and Rep. Ted Deutch, all Democrats, to Joel Brasfield, the president of the nation's largest private prisoner transportation firm, Prisoner Transportation Services LLC. PTS is paid on a per-prisoner-per-mile basis, and its drivers travel in vans packed with passengers, some of whom are on board for days or even weeks. Some have medical issues. At least five people have died aboard PTS vehicles since 2012, according to reporting by The Marshall Project in a follow-up to an earlier investigation of problems in the industry. Every year, tens of thousands of people are driven to face criminal charges in faraway jurisdictions by for-profit prison transportation companies, which are supposed to be regulated by the U.S. Department of Justice. The agency has penalized one prisoner transport company—not PTS—after an inmate fled an unlocked van and was found in a cornfield in 2011. The Congressional letter cites reports of “inhumane and unsafe conditions” aboard PTS's vans, “including unsanitary practices, gross negligence, physical and sexual abuse, and a disturbing inattentiveness to the basic and urgent medical needs of incarcerated persons in your custody.” PTS did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The letter also requested PTS demonstrate compliance with federal regulations, provide contracts with the governments it does business with, as well as furnish documents and details regarding medical emergencies, deaths and reports of sexual abuse. It requests a response by March 13. The letter to PTS represents the latest call by lawmakers for increased scrutiny of the industry. The initial Marshall Project story prompted then-U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch to promise an investigation, but the status of that inquiry is not clear. Both Deutch, D-Fla., and Booker, D-N.J., have previously called on Justice to probe whether the companies have violated the law.