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National: Sen Warren and others go after private prisons

Washington, DC - United States Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), along with Senators Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), Kamala Harris (D-Calif.), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Cory Booker (D-N.J.), Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii), Tom Udall (D-N.M.), and Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), today sent letters to GEO Group and CoreCivic, the two largest private immigration detention contractors in the United States, to request information about the companies' compliance with federal immigration detention standards following a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) report about unsafe conditions and mistreatment of immigrants at a number of privately-run immigration detention centers. The senators also wrote separately to Nakamoto Group, a private company responsible for auditing immigration detention facilities, about the company's questionable record of reviewing conditions at those facilities. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) currently detains around 40,000 immigrants in 211 detention facilities across the United States. GEO Group and CoreCivic together house the vast majority of immigrants held in privately-operated detention facilities—and their role continues to grow under the Trump Administration, which reversed an Obama-era policy to phase out the federal government's reliance on private prisons. In their letters to GEO Group and CoreCivic, the senators outlined how the companies' aggressive lobbying efforts to promote immigration policies that boost their profits have largely paid off, noting that the Trump Administration's immigration agenda has filled private facilities with migrant adults and children. The senators also pointed out that GEO Group has received \$560 million in federal contracts in the last two fiscal years, while CoreCivic has received contracts worth \$225 million to manage ICE immigration detention facilities since 2017. "The President's harmful and destructive immigration agenda has done immeasurable damage to immigrants, their communities, and America's standing in the world as a safe haven for refugees and asylum seekers, but it has been lucrative for private prison corporations that operate immigration detention facilities," the senators wrote. The senators also expressed deep concern with the findings of a DHS OIG investigation into ICE's oversight of immigration detention facilities, which revealed that the private prison facilities it visited "undermine[d] the protection of detainees' rights, their humane treatment, and the provision of a safe and healthy environment." The OIG report also found that inspections conducted by Nakamoto Group are potentially misrepresenting conditions in these facilities or underreporting violations. "These reports and the results of the OIG investigations indicate that the perverse profit incentive at the core of the private prison business model has resulted in GEO Group and CoreCivic boosting profits by cutting costs on expenditures including food, health care, and sufficient pay and training for guards and prison staff," the senators continued. In a series of questions, the senators requested information about each immigration detention facility operated by GEO Group and CoreCivic, their inspection records and results of audits, information about deficiencies cited in the reviews, as well as evidence that they have been or are being addressed. The senators' letter to Nakamoto Group asked several questions about the company's compliance with its government contract and the effectiveness of its inspections. The senators requested the information be provided no later than November 30, 2018.