

PRESS RELEASE



American Friends Service Committee
and Human Rights Defense Center

For Immediate Release

March 31, 2014

Arizona Lawmaker Behind \$900,000 Giveaway in Taxpayer Funds to Private Prison Company Received Campaign Donations from Same Firm

PHOENIX, AZ – Last Friday, the *Arizona Republic* reported that House Appropriations Chairman John Kavanagh had inserted \$900,000 in additional funding into the House state budget for the GEO Group, the nation’s second-largest for-profit prison company.

Rep. Kavanagh stated that lobbyists for GEO, which operates two correctional facilities in Florence and one in Phoenix, had requested the extra funds.

The company’s lobbyists apparently felt comfortable approaching Rep. Kavanagh with their request for more money, perhaps because he had received at least six campaign contributions from GEO executives and officials during the last legislative election cycle.

In fact, Rep. Kavanagh received the maximum amount of individual campaign donations from GEO Group CEO George Zoley, senior vice presidents Thomas Wierdsma, John Bulfin, Jorge Dominicis and Stephen Fuller, plus GEO employee James Black. The donations, each in the maximum allowable amount of \$424, were all made between June 29 and July 9, 2012.

This is in addition to contributions from lobbyists hired to represent GEO Group in Arizona. Pivotal Policy Consulting is GEO’s current lobbying firm; previously, Public Policy Partners had lobbied for the corporation. Two of the lobbyists for Pivotal, Kristen Boilini and Nicholas Simonetta, made political donations to Rep. Kavanagh during the last election cycle.

“When elected lawmakers bestow gifts of taxpayer funds on companies that give them campaign contributions, members of the public must wonder whether there is a *quid pro quo* arrangement and if legislators are acting in the best interest of the public or protecting the special interests of their corporate donors,” said Alex Friedmann, associate director of the Human Rights Defense Center and an expert on prison privatization.

This is not the first time that Rep. Kavanagh has gone to bat for for-profit prison corporations in Arizona. In 2011, after the *Arizona Republic* reported that a state statute requiring biannual quality comparisons of public and private prisons had not been enforced, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) sued the state, forcing the Department of Corrections to pull an RFP for 5,000 private prison beds. The following year, Rep. Kavanagh inserted a provision during the state budget process that repealed the quality comparison statute.

When questioned in the past about his receipt of campaign contributions from private prison firms, Rep. Kavanagh has insisted that he accepts money from many sources and that such funds do not influence his decisions. However, Caroline Isaacs, director of AFSC's Arizona office, said the special appropriation for GEO Group proves that private prison money talks in Arizona, and legislators listen. "The hubris, both on the part of GEO and Rep. Kavanagh, is astonishing," she said. "To think he could give away almost a million dollars and nobody would bat an eye."

GEO Group operates facilities that house Arizona prisoners under contracts with the state, and the compensation the company receives is specified in those contracts. The additional funding included in the FY 2015 House budget by Rep. Kavanagh is over and above the contractually-agreed payments that GEO already receives from the state.

Notably, the *Republic* reported that a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Corrections had stated flatly that the department did not request extra funding for GEO. Spokesman Doug Nick was quoted as saying, "We had nothing to do with it."

According to a report released in September 2013 by In the Public Interest, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that conducts research on privatization of public services and advocates for responsible contracting, Arizona's contracts with GEO include "bed guarantees" of up to 100%. Such bed guarantees mean the company receives per diem payments for a minimum number of prison beds even if they are not being used to hold prisoners.

"GEO already receives giveaways of taxpayer money in the form of contractual bed guarantees, which allow the company to profit even when beds in its for-profit prisons remain empty," noted Friedmann. "The additional money that Rep. Kavanagh has so generously offered to GEO Group is simply taxpayer-funded frosting on the company's private prison cake."

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) combines advocacy for incarcerated people and their families with statewide policy change to document and improve prison conditions while working to reduce the number of people incarcerated in Arizona.

The Human Rights Defense Center, founded in 1990 and based in Lake Worth, Florida, is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting human rights in U.S. detention facilities. HRDC publishes *Prison Legal News* (PLN), a monthly magazine that includes reports, reviews and analysis of court rulings and news related to prisoners' rights and criminal justice issues. PLN has around 9,000 subscribers nationwide and operates a website (www.prisonlegalnews.org) that includes a comprehensive database of prison and jail-related articles, news reports, court rulings, verdicts, settlements and related documents.

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