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Rep. Raúl Grijalva wants end to privately owned prisons, immigrant detention centers

The Latino Democrat said private companies "have benefited from lucrative government contracts and taxpayer dollars to profit off the pain and suffering of others" A Latino Democratic lawmaker from Arizona has drafted legislation that would end federal contracts with private companies and remove federal prisoners and immigrant detainees from the facilities within two years. Rep. Raúl Grijalva of Arizona plans to reintroduce the Justice is Not For Sale Act on Thursday. It would bar the Justice Department from contracting with private entities to provide or operate prisons and immigration detention facilities, as well as move its prisoners and detainees out of those facilities. "For too long, private prisons and detention centers have benefited from lucrative government contracts and taxpayer dollars to profit off the pain and suffering of others," Grijalva said in a statement to NBC News. Grijalva's legislation would go further than President Joe Biden's Jan. 26 executive order, which phases out private prison contracts and instructs the Justice Department to decline to renew private prison contracts. Biden's order does not address privately operated immigration detention centers as Grijalva's bill does. While only about 8 percent of imprisoned people were held in private prisons, 81 percent of people in immigration custody were held in privately run or -operated detention centers, according to a report last year by the American Civil Liberties Union. The bill also seeks to end contracts with private companies for other criminal justice entities, such as halfway houses, re-entry programs and community treatment centers, among others. Grijalva's office said private companies have extended into those areas as the movement against the private prison industry has grown. 'Perverse profit incentives' Immigration and civil rights advocates have pressed Biden to eliminate private contracts for immigration detention. Grijalva called Biden's executive order "an important step to address the mass incarceration crisis that disproportionately impacts immigrants and communities of color." But he said the federal government must stop using state and local prisons and immigration detention centers that contract with private companies and "account for a large slice of the U.S. prison population." "My bill ends family detention and reinstates case management programs while removing the perverse profit incentives that allow private prison companies to flourish," he said. He said the private prison companies have lobbied through the American Legislative Exchange Council for harsher laws that have helped increase the prison population they are paid to house. The bill would also increase oversight of how much inmates and families are charged for services like banking and phone calls, and it increase inspection and oversight of immigration detention centers. A 2016 Justice Department report found that private prisons had a 28 percent higher rate of inmate-on-inmate assaults and more than twice as many inmate-on-staff assaults compared to federal prisons, Grijalva said in the letter. Grijalva has sponsored legislation since 2015 to address the private prison industry, having begun the work as co-chair of the Progressive Caucus.