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### **Lawmakers want answers from ICE, contractor regarding COVID-19 outbreak at NM jail**

Members of Congress troubled at reports of Cibola County center guards not wearing PPE when escorting sick detainees to hospital; company denies that

EL PASO, Texas (Border Report) — Members of New Mexico’s congressional delegation want to know why a COVID-19 outbreak took place despite warnings at a privately-run detention center in Cibola County. In a recent letter to the Acting Director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other officials, the lawmakers expressed “serious concerns” about a significant rise in coronavirus infections among inmates and staff at the Cibola County Corrections Center. The center now accounts for 84% of all reported COVID-19 cases in the county, with 246 of those being recorded between July 27 and July 29. The center is run by CoreCivic, a company contracted by ICE to operate migrant detention facilities in Texas and other states. “This increase ... raises questions on CoreCivic’s preparation and ability to keep inmates, detainees and staff safe and puts the county of Cibola, New Mexico ... at risk of viral exposure,” the letter states. The lawmakers are troubled because back in April — after the first coronavirus infection was reported at the Cibola center — they had been assured by CoreCivic that it was implementing a COVID-19 action plan to prevent further infections. “We are concerned that while CoreCivic stated it implemented (the plan), ordered test kits and developed contingency plans, it wasn’t until the New Mexico Department of Health directed Cibola to conduct mass testing with kits provided by the state that CoreCivic realized it had a massive viral outbreak in its facilities,” the letter states. The Democratic lawmakers — U.S. Sens. Martin Heinrich and Tom Udall, U.S. Reps. Xochitl Torres Small, Ben Ray Lujan and Deb Haaland — also allege that correctional officers at Cibola aren’t wearing personal protective equipment while escorting sick inmates to hospitals, jeopardizing themselves, medical workers and other patients to COVID-19. And this isn’t because the company lacks PPE, the lawmakers say. “This is troubling since two weeks before the outbreak at Cibola (a company official) stated at a hearing of the Border Security Subcommittee that ‘we’ve got plenty of masks in inventory and have the flexibility ... to relocate masks to other facilities,’” the letter states. The lawmakers are giving ICE, CoreCivic and the U.S. Marshals Service until Friday to answer their questions. In an email to Border Report, CoreCivic said it has responded “appropriately, thoroughly and with care” to the COVID-19 pandemic. The company also said it requires staff members to wear face masks inside the facility and during transport of detainees. “We have received the letter sent to us by the New Mexico congressional delegation and are working to provide them a formal response. We have also been working in close partnership with the New Mexico Department of Health, including regular communication with our contacts there since the facility had its first positive care in May,” said Ryan Gustin, manager of public affairs for CoreCivic. The company says all detainees are now going through daily symptoms and temperature checks and that staff are conducting regular meetings with detainees on sanitation protocols, social distancing and the use of PPE, among others.