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**GEO Group can't nix \$17.3 mln award in \$1-a-day detainee pay case**

(Reuters) - A federal judge in Washington has upheld a \$17.3 million jury award for immigrant detainees who were paid far below the minimum wage to participate in a work program, rejecting private prison operator GEO Group Inc's bid to significantly lower it. U.S. District Judge Robert Bryan in Tacoma on Wednesday said a dispute over how many hours the detainees, who were paid \$1 a day, worked was not enough to upset the October verdict, which GEO had sought to lower to no more than \$13.6 million. "The jury was free to, and apparently did, find much of GEO's evidence not credible," the judge said in a brief order. Bryan granted GEO Group's motion to stay enforcement of the judgment pending an appeal. Florida-based GEO, which is represented by III Branches Law Firm, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Neither did lawyers at Schroeter Goldmark & Bender who represent a class of hundreds of people who were detained at the facility. GEO Group, in response to the 2017 lawsuit, had argued that detainees at the 1,575-bed facility in Tacoma were not its employees under state law and were not owed the minimum wage. GEO said federal regulations permitted it to pay detainees \$1 a day to clean, do laundry, wash dishes and to staff a barber shop and library. The class action was consolidated with a similar lawsuit by the Washington Attorney General's office. Bryan last month ordered GEO to pay nearly \$6 million to the state after the jury ruled against the company. The cases are Washington v. GEO Group Inc and Nwauzor v. GEO Group Inc, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington, Nos. 3:17-cv-05806, and 3:17-cv-05769. For the private plaintiffs: Jamal Whitehead of Schroeter Goldmark & Bender For the state: Marsha Chien and Andrea Brenneke of the Washington attorney general's office For GEO: Joan Mell of III Branches Law Firm