

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 21, 2020

George C. Zoley
Chief Executive Officer
The GEO Group Inc.
621 NW 53rd Street, Suite 700
Boca Raton, FL 33487

Dear Mr. Zoley:

As the owner and operator of the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington, The GEO Group Inc. (GEO) has a contractual responsibility for the health and wellbeing of detainees and staff. Given the ongoing novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, we write to request information about steps being taken by GEO to plan, mitigate, and respond to any potential outbreak at the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC).

King County and the Seattle area is the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. Public health experts expect confirmed cases to continue to rise and the outbreak to spread. Populations living in close quarters and confined spaces are especially vulnerable to potential catastrophic outbreaks. We have already seen that immigration detention centers, such as the NWDC, are particularly susceptible to outbreaks of diseases. In August of 2019, the CDC reported that nearly 1,000 detainees and staffers at US immigration detention facilities had gotten mumps in an 11-month timespan.¹ According to public health experts and officials, “people residing in close living quarters are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 and will need special attention both to minimize transmission risk and address their healthcare needs in the context of an outbreak.”²

According to the Performance Based National Detention Standards, which GEO group is required to meet, each facility “shall have written plans that address the management of infections and communicable diseases, including screening, prevention, education, identification, monitoring and surveillance... and reporting to local, state and federal agencies”.³ We understand that restrictions were recently put in place for outside visitors to the NWDC, including legal counsel.

Please provide the updated policies and procedures GEO has in place to prepare and respond to a potential outbreak at the NWDC, and answers to the following questions by Wednesday, March 25. In addition, we request that you answer the following inquiries:

¹ “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.” *Center for Disease Control*, 2019, www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/pdfs/mm6834a4-H.pdf.

² *Achieving A Fair and Effective COVID-19 Response: An Open Letter to Vice-President Mike Pence, and Other Federal, State and Local Leaders from Public Health and Legal Experts in the United States*. law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/area/center/ghjp/documents/final_covid-19_letter_from_public_health_and_legal_experts.pdf.

³ Immigration, U. S., and Customs Enforcement. "Performance-Based National Detention Standards 2011." (2012).

- How does GEO plan to identify individuals within the NWDC that are at a heightened risk of serious illness should they contract COVID-19? What protocols and procedures exist to protect these individuals?
- What policies and procedures does GEO follow when committing individuals to medical isolation? Does the NWDC have the capacity to isolate individuals from other inmates effectively should they contract COVID-19 or show symptoms, per the recommendations of public health officials? How many detainees does GEO believe it has the space to quarantine in isolation at the NWDC? If this number is less than the current population of NWDC, what plans are in place to partner with Pierce County Public Health, Washington State Department of Health, and other relevant stakeholders to adequately quarantine detainees? Does this isolation result in solitary confinement?
- What practices is GEO implementing to ensure social distancing recommendations from the CDC are met? Given the population count of NWDC and capacity of the facility, can GEO ensure that detainees maintain 6 feet of distance from one another at all times?
- What COVID-19 testing capabilities does GEO have access to? How many people has GEO tested to date? What criteria is GEO using to determine if an individual will be tested?
- Does GEO report test results to Pierce County Public Health and the Washington State Department of Health? Has GEO consulted with the local or state public health agency on their mitigation and response plans? What public information does GEO plan to provide regarding test results at the NWDC? Will GEO make public the number of people it has tested and the results?
- What screening procedures are being implemented to mitigate the harm that may be caused by GEO, DHS, and other staff coming and going from facilities? What steps is GEO taking to ensure that detainees can still have access to legal counsel, while minimizing potential spread of COVID-19? What is GEO doing to ensure that spaces used by attorneys and their clients are adequately sanitized between uses?
- What additional measures have been implemented to augment existing hygiene and sanitation standards?
- What information has GEO provided to detainees about the COVID-19 outbreak? Given that family visits have stopped, what additional methods of communication is GEO facilitating between detainees and their families? Is GEO working to set up free audio or video calls during this uncertainty? If not, why not?
- For individuals who have been deported since January 20, 2020, the beginning of the outbreak in Washington state, which countries have they been deported to, and for those deported to Mexico what is their medical access status?

Thank you for your attention to this critical public health matter.

Sincerely,



Adam Smith
Member of Congress



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress



Derek Kilmer
Member of Congress



Denny Heck
Member of Congress