

August 15, 2013

Dear McAllen city officials,

We, the undersigned community, faith, civil rights, immigration, criminal justice reform, and labor organizations, are opposed to the construction of a new private prison in McAllen, Texas.

According to *The McAllen Monitor*¹, city officials engaged in a year of backroom discussions with for-profit prison corporations, seeking a more than thirtyfold increase in McAllen's current detention agreement with the United States Marshals Service (USMS) that would require construction of a new, 1000-bed private prison in McAllen. Rather than move forward with this process, we urge McAllen officials to act in the best interests of the City and abandon plans to construct a private prison.

Building a private prison is not an effective economic development strategy. An academic study published earlier this year found that new prisons do not create net economic growth, and that prison privatization actually impedes employment growth in the host county.²

Moreover, handing control of prisons over to for-profit companies is a recipe for abuse, neglect, and misconduct. Take, for example, the two biggest private prison companies that have shown interest in bidding on the deal: Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and GEO Group.

GEO Group has been implicated in the serious mistreatment of young people at the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility in Mississippi, which Federal Judge Carlton Reeves called a "cesspool of unconstitutional and inhuman acts."³ At the GEO Group-run South Florida State Hospital, three mental health patients died gruesome deaths in the fall of 2012 that a state-ordered review attributed to staff neglect and cutting corners.⁴ The CCA-operated Idaho Correctional Center was so much more violent than Idaho's other prisons that it earned the nickname "Gladiator School."⁵ In 2009, prisoners at GEO-operated Reeves County Detention Center rioted over issues at the facility that reportedly included poor quality of health care and multiple prisoner deaths.⁶ In 2007, state officials shut down the Coke County Juvenile Justice Center due to the unsafe and unsanitary conditions under GEO Group operation.⁷

Not surprisingly, some local governments have regretted ever having invited these private prison companies to town. According to news reports, the CCA-run Northeast Ohio Correctional Center was plagued with violence and unrest almost from the moment it opened in 1997, seeing 13 stabbings, two murders, and six escapes in just

¹ Hendricks, D., "McAllen mulls 1,000-bed private prison," *The Monitor*, July 1, 2013. <http://www.themonitor.com/news/local/article_af133f5e-e2ab-11e2-8b8b-001a4bcf6878.html>

² S. Genter, G. Hooks, C. Mosher, *Prisons, jobs, and privatization: The impact of prisons on employment growth in rural US counties, 1997-2004*, 42 SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH 596-610 (2013).

³ Burnett, J., "Miss. Prison Operator Out; Facility Called 'Cesspool,'" *National Public Radio*, April 24, 2012. <<http://www.npr.org/2012/04/24/151276620/firm-leaves-miss-after-its-prison-is-called-cesspool>>

⁴ Haughney, K., "State reviews deaths and private-run mental hospital in Broward," *Sun Sentinel*, July 25, 2012. <http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2012-07-25/news/fl-geo-hospital-bad-review-20120725_1_mental-health-hospital-employees-three-mental-patients>

⁵ Boone, R., "Gladiator School: Camera's Catch Prison Guards Watching Inmate-On-Inmate Attack At Idaho Prison," *The Huffington Post*, November 30, 2010. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/30/gladiator-school-cameras- n_789780.html>

⁶ DiGiacomo, J., "Texas riot quelled; inmates damage building," *CNN*, February 1, 2009. <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/02/01/texas.prison.riot/>>

⁷ Anthony, P., "TYC officials stand by decision to shut down Coke County Juvenile Justice Center," *San Angelo Standard Times*, October 18, 2007. <<http://www.gosanangelo.com/news/2007/oct/18/tyc-officials-stand-by-decision-to-shut-down/>>

its first fourteen months of operation. Despite having initially drawn CCA to the city, the mayor of Youngstown later told reporters, “Knowing what I know now, I would never have allowed CCA to build a prison here.”⁸

In Littlefield, Texas, the Idaho Department of Corrections pulled its prisoners out of the GEO-operated Bill Clayton Detention Center, following budget cuts, accusations of “squalid conditions,” and a high-profile suicide.⁹ Without a way to fill the beds, GEO Group left, the facility closed, and the town was left with \$1.2 million in debt. Montgomery County contracted with GEO Group and built the Joe Corley Detention Center on the expectation that the USMS and Immigration and Customs Enforcement would fill the beds. Six years later, the facility is still nearly empty and the county had to sell it to cover a \$38 million debt.¹⁰

In addition to social justice, criminal justice reform, labor, and civil liberties organizations, several faith denominations stand united against the for-profit prison industry. The Presbyterian Church, U.S. Catholic Bishops, and the United Methodist Church have issued resolutions and official statements proclaiming moral opposition to profiteering from imprisonment.

Finally, the vast majority of people incarcerated in McAllen for the USMS would likely be immigrants charged with unauthorized border-crossing, rather than people charged with violent or serious crimes. Since the federal “Operation Streamline” program of criminalizing migrants began in Del Rio, Texas in 2005, unauthorized border-crossers have increasingly been funneled into the federal criminal justice system rather than released or civilly detained.¹¹ The Southern District of Texas (the federal judicial district in which McAllen sits) is no exception. In the first eight months of this fiscal year, 89% of the new prosecutions in this district identified unlawful entry or re-entry as the lead charges.

This criminalization of migrants has meant huge profits for private prison companies like GEO Group and CCA, who have seen record profits each year since the implementation of Operation Streamline. McAllen should not further contribute to this trend.

For-profit private prisons are the wrong choice for Texas and the wrong choice for McAllen. We urge you to abandon plans to contract with a private prison company to construct a for-profit prison in McAllen. We appreciate your attention in this matter and would be pleased to provide further information.

ACLU National Prison Project
ACLU of Texas
AFSCME Texas Correctional Employee’s Council
American Federation of Government Employees Local 2272
American Gateways
Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition
Center for Constitutional Rights
DBA Press
Detention Watch Network

⁸ Yeoman, B., “Steel Town Lockdown,” *Mother Jones*, May/June 2000. < <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2000/05/steel-town-lockdown>>

⁹ Miller, J., “Suicide exposes squalid conditions at Spur prison,” *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*, July 8, 2007. <http://lubbockonline.com/stories/070807/nat_070807073.shtml>

¹⁰ Roden, H., “Montgomery County may put Corley jail facility up for sale,” *The Potpourri: Magnolia Edition*, January 16, 2013. <http://www.yourhoustonnews.com/magnolia/news/montgomery-county-may-put-corley-jail-facility-up-for-sale/article_d6978e0a-5ffb-11e2-975a-0019bb2963f4.html>

¹¹ Grassroots Leadership, “Operation Streamline: Costs and Consequences,” September 2012. <http://grassrootsleadership.org/sites/default/files/uploads/GRL_Sept2012_Report-final.pdf>

The Dream Defenders
Ella Baker Center for Human Rights
Enlace
Families for Freedom
Florida Immigrant Coalition
Fuerza Del Valle Workers' Center
Grassroots Leadership
Human Rights Defense Center
In the Public Interest
Justice Strategies
La Union del Pueblo Entero
Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition
Monmouth County Coalition for Immigrant Rights
National Advocates for Pregnant Women
National Immigration Project of the National Lawyer's Guild
New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City
People for Peace and Justice
Politics Focus Committee Racine Dominicans
Private Corrections Institute
Private Corrections Working Group
RGV Community DREAMers
Rights Working Group
Rise Up Texas
School of the Americas Watch
Simply Necias Artist Collective
St. Matthew Immigration/Detention Committee
START Center
South Texas Civil Rights Project
Student Farmworker Alliance
Texans United For Families
Texas Civil Rights Project
Texas Criminal Justice Coalition
Texas Impact
Texas Inmate Families Association
Texas Jail Project
Texas Latina Advocacy Network/Red de Abogacia de Latinas de Tejas
Texas State Employees Union
The Sentencing Project
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
United Methodist Women El Buen Pastor
University Leadership Initiative