

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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September 15, 2020

The Honorable Joseph V. Cuffari  
Inspector General  
Department of Homeland Security  
245 Murray Lane, S.W., Building 410  
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Inspector General Cuffari:

We are writing to request an emergency investigation into shocking allegations of medical atrocities and detainee mistreatment at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC).

On September 14, 2020, several organizations filed a complaint with your office, the ICE Atlanta Field Office, the ICDC Warden, and the Department of Homeland Security Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties.<sup>1</sup> This complaint is based on reports from ICDC detainees and a whistleblower who works in the facility as a nurse, and it alleges “jarring medical neglect” and “red flags regarding the rate at which hysterectomies are performed on immigrant women” by a doctor to whom the facility regularly sends women detainees.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that serious concerns have been raised about this facility. As you know, our Committee staff conducted a site visit at this facility in September 2019, during which they observed alarmingly urgent health and safety issues. In fact, Committee staff were so disturbed that they raised concerns directly with the ICDC warden during the visit.

In addition, following the Committee staff site visit, Chairwoman Maloney sent a letter to you requesting that your office investigate health and safety issues at ICDC and other ICE detention facilities. In that letter, the Chairwoman detailed several problems that Committee

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<sup>1</sup> Government Accountability Project, *Press Release: Whistleblowing Nurse from Detention Center in Georgia Reports Unsafe Practices that Promote the Spread of COVID-19 in ICE Detention* (Sept. 14, 2020) (online at <https://whistleblower.org/press-release/press-release-whistleblowing-nurse-from-detention-center-in-georgia-reports-unsafe-practices-that-promote-the-spread-of-covid-19-in-ice-detention/>).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Project South, Georgia Detention Watch, Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, and South Georgia Immigrant Support Network, to Inspector General Joseph V. Cuffari, Department of Homeland Security, Cameron Quinn, Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Department of Homeland Security, Acting Director Thomas P. Giles, Atlanta ICE Field Office, and Warden David Paulk, Irwin County Detention Center (Sept. 14, 2020) (online at <https://projectsouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OIG-ICDC-Complaint-1.pdf>).

staff observed, including the following:

Several detainees at the Irwin County Detention Center reported concerns with sleep deprivation caused by repeated counts of detainees during the night, lights not being dimmed until midnight on weekdays and 2 a.m. on weekends, and a wake-up time to eat breakfast at 4 a.m.<sup>3</sup>

During the same inspection, detainees also reported to Committee staff numerous untreated medical concerns. One detainee said that his medicine was taken away when he arrived at the facility, even though he had come from another ICE detention center. Another detainee said that staff removed lifts he needed in his shoes due to unequal leg length, forcing him to walk with a cane. Another detainee said he had not been treated for ongoing tooth pain, while yet another said he had not received medication for his high blood pressure. Several detainees also reported that a detainee was given a wheelchair that did not function properly and was forced to rely on assistance from other detainees to use the restroom.<sup>4</sup>

The complaint submitted to your office earlier this week sets forth horrific new allegations of medical mistreatment that demand further investigation, especially allegations regarding the high number of unnecessary hysterectomies performed on women detainees at ICDC. The complaint quoted one detainee describing this issue:

[A] detained immigrant told Project South that she talked to five different women detained at ICDC between October and December 2019 who had a hysterectomy done. When she talked to them about the surgery, the women “reacted confused when explaining why they had one done.” The woman told Project South that it was as though the women were “trying to tell themselves it’s going to be OK.” She further said: “When I met all these women who had had surgeries, I thought this was like an experimental concentration camp. It was like they’re experimenting with our bodies.”<sup>5</sup>

Dawn Wooten, the nurse and whistleblower at the facility, described her observations on the unusual number of hysterectomies performed by the outside doctor the facility uses for gynecological treatment:

- “Everybody he sees has a hysterectomy—just about everybody. He’s even taken out the wrong ovary on a young lady [detained immigrant woman].”

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from Acting Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney, Committee on Oversight and Reform, to Inspector General Joseph V. Cuffari, Department of Homeland Security (Nov. 18, 2019) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2019-11-18.CBM%20to%20Cuffari%20-%20DHS%20IG%20re%20StaffDels.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Project South, Georgia Detention Watch, Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, and South Georgia Immigrant Support Network, to Inspector General Joseph V. Cuffari, Department of Homeland Security, Cameron Quinn, Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Department of Homeland Security, Acting Director Thomas P. Giles, Atlanta ICE Field Office, and Warden David Paulk, Irwin County Detention Center (Sept. 14, 2020) (online at <https://projectsouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OIG-ICDC-Complaint-1.pdf>).

- “I’ve had several inmates tell me that they’ve been to see the doctor and they’ve had hysterectomies and they don’t know why they went or why they’re going.”
- “These immigrant women, I don’t think they really, totally, all the way understand this is what’s going to happen depending on who explains it to them.”
- “Ms. Wooten stated that the sick call nurse tries to communicate with the detained immigrants and speak Spanish to detained immigrants by simply googling Spanish or by asking another detained immigrant to help interpret rather than using the language line as medical staff are supposed to.”<sup>6</sup>

When Chairwoman Maloney sent her letter to you last year, your office indicated that it would incorporate the information provided by the Committee into the office’s ICE facility inspection plans and follow up with the Committee as warranted. Since that time, however, we have not received any updates on your work involving these facilities.

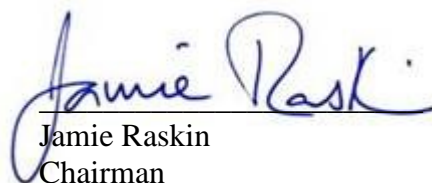
For these reasons, we request that you schedule a briefing this week to provide an update on your response to the Chairwoman’s November 2019 letter, including an update on any investigative steps or site visits that you have conducted since then. We also request that your office immediately investigate the allegations in the new complaint filed yesterday and report back to the Committee on the findings of that investigation.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. If you have any questions, please contact Committee staff at (202) 225-5051. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Carolyn B. Maloney  
Chairwoman



Jamie Raskin  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and  
Civil Liberties

cc: The Honorable James R. Comer, Ranking Member

The Honorable Chip Roy, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.*