

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

December 9, 2019

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

Dear Mr. Zoley:

We are writing to request additional information regarding recent reports that David J. Venturella, The GEO Group, Inc.'s (GEO's) Senior Vice President of Client Relations, has patronized President Trump's hotel in Washington, D.C. at least ten times, charging "Trump hotel bills to his GEO credit card."¹ Given Mr. Venturella's active involvement in attempts to convince the Trump administration to intervene in litigation against GEO regarding allegations that it has engaged in human trafficking and forced detainees to work for little or no pay,² including attempts to get taxpayer dollars to reimburse GEO for the cost of defending those lawsuits, these transactions raise questions about whether GEO is attempting to curry favor with the President by funneling money to the Trump family through the Trump Organization.

GEO is one of the largest private prison operators in the U.S., and operates a number of immigration detention facilities through contracts with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).³ In recent years, GEO has faced a number of lawsuits over the mistreatment of immigrant detainees in GEO's facilities. Specifically, thousands of immigrants detained in GEO-run facilities allege that GEO has unlawfully engaged in human trafficking by forcing them to work for no pay or as little as \$1 per day.⁴

Facing this litigation, Mr. Venturella wrote a private letter to ICE in February 2018, stating that "[t]here is an urgent need for the federal government to participate" in litigation against the

¹ Daily Beast, "Private Prison Exec Pursues Federal Cash, Spends at Trump Hotel," Nick Schwellenbach, Katherine Hawkins, and Adam Zagorin, November 18, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/private-prison-executive-at-geo-group-pursues-federal-funds-spends-at-trump-hotel?ref=scroll>.

² *Id.*

³ Miami Herald, "The nation's largest private prisons operator is based in Florida. And profits are up," Adam Snitzer, April 22, 2019, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/business/biz-monday/article227477119.html>

⁴ In 2017, a federal judge in Colorado certified a class action in Colorado against GEO for forcing tens of thousands of immigrants to work for \$1 or less per day Washington Post, "Thousands of ICE detainees claim they were forced into labor, a violation of anti-slavery laws," Kristine Phillips, March 5, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/03/05/thousands-of-ice-detainees-claim-they-were-forced-into-labor-a-violation-of-anti-slavery-laws/>; Similar lawsuits in California and Washington have alleged claims of "forced labor" and accused the company of coercing detainees into labor for \$1 per day. United States District Court Central District of California Eastern Division, *Nova v. The GEO Group, Inc.*, December 19, 2017, <http://www.burnscharest.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-12-19-Novoa-Dkt-1-Complaint2.pdf>; CNN Business, "Lawsuit: ICE detention center paid imprisoned workers less than \$1 per day," Jackie Wattles, September 20, 2017, <https://money.cnn.com/2017/09/20/news/companies/washington-immigration-detainees-wage-attorney-general/index.html>.

company.⁵ Mr. Venturella noted that “the legal discovery costs could total several millions of dollars and potential damages could be in the tens of millions,” and informed the government that “GEO would need to be reimbursed for all of the cost[s].”⁶ In May 2018, GEO sent a follow-up letter to ICE “urgently implor[ing] U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to take over the defense of these lawsuits and reimburse[e] GEO for its costs.”⁷ During or around this time, Mr. Venturella traveled to Washington, D.C. to discuss the request. While he claimed that he did not recall whether he stayed at the Trump International Hotel during that visit, he made clear that he stayed at Trump International Hotel between on at least 10 occasions.⁸ These trips appear to be business-related on behalf of GEO, as Mr. Venturella charged bills to GEO on each occasion.⁹

Although ICE rejected GEO’s repeated requests to use taxpayer dollars to cover GEO’s legal expenses in July 2018,¹⁰ one year later, in August 2019, the Trump Administration appears to have responded favorably to GEO’s requests for government intervention, as the DOJ formally intervened in the lawsuits and asked a federal judge to dismiss the lawsuit against GEO’s Northwest Detention Center in Washington.¹¹

Choosing specifically to patronize President Trump’s hotel while soliciting intervention from the Trump Administration in a lawsuit against GEO, including requesting millions of taxpayer dollars to cover GEO’s legal expenses, raises serious concerns about possible corruption, or the appearance of corruption. We have introduced sweeping ethics legislation, the *Anti-Corruption and Public Integrity Act*, which would eliminate the potential for this kind of corruption by applying conflict of interest laws to the President and requiring that the President fully divest from businesses, hotels, and other conflicted assets.¹²

We intend to keep working to make that bill law. To inform our efforts, and to address ongoing concerns about corruption in the Trump Administration, we ask that you provide answers to the following questions by December 20, 2019.

1. Mr. Venturella stated that he stayed at the Trump International Hotel on ten to twenty occasions. Please list the dates of each stay.

⁵ Deportation Research Clinic, “Request for Equitable Adjustment in the Amount of \$2,057,000 and Legal Assistance from ICE/DOJ,” February 14, 2018, https://deportationresearchclinic.org/GEO_2-14-2018_ICLI00052.pdf.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Deportation Research Clinic, “Letter from the GEO Group, Inc. to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement,” May 30, 2018, https://deportationresearchclinic.org/GEO_5-3-2018-ICLI00052.pdf.

⁸ Daily Beast, “Private Prison Exec Pursues Federal Cash, Spends at Trump Hotel,” Nick Schwellenbach, Katherine Hawkins, and Adam Zagorin, November 18, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/private-prison-executive-at-geo-group-pursues-federal-funds-spends-at-trump-hotel?ref=scroll>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ The Daily Beast, “Private Prison Bosses Beg taxpayers to Pay Human-Trafficking Lawsuit Bills,” Betsy Woodruff, July 17, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/private-prison-bosses-beg-taxpayers-topay-human-trafficking-lawsuit-bills?ref=home>.

¹¹ United States District Court Western District of Washington at Tacoma, “Statement of Interest of the United States,” August 20, 2019, https://www.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.wawd.251024/gov.uscourts.wawd.251024.290.0_1.pdf.

¹² Anti-Corruption and Public Integrity Act, S. 3357, 115th Cong. § 624 (2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/3357/text#id459D54901B374D9DB8D5E11BF7C59438>

- a. Did any other GEO executives stay at the Trump International Hotel on those occasions? If so, please list the name of each GEO executive and the dates of their stay.
2. Between January 20, 2017 and present, apart from the trips listed in Question 1, have you or other GEO executives, including Mr. Venturella, stayed at the Trump International Hotel?
 - a. If so, please provide the dates of your stay and the names of the executives.
 - b. If not, please provide the names of other hotels that you or other executives stayed at in the Washington, D.C. area.
3. Why did Mr. Venturella, and any other GEO executives who stayed at the Trump International Hotel, choose that hotel over other options in the area?
4. Did you or any other GEO executives communicate with any Trump administration officials that any GEO executives intended to or booked hotel stays at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C.? If so, please identify all such communications, the individuals involved in the discussion, the date of the communications, and the nature of the conversation.
5. Did you or any other GEO executives communicate with Donald Trump Jr., Eric Trump, or any other member of the Trump family that any GEO executives intended to book, or did book, hotel stays at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C.? If so, please identify all such communications, the individuals involved in the discussion, the date of the communications, and the nature of the communications.
6. Did you or any other GEO executives attend meetings with government officials on any of the dates corresponding with stays at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C.? If so, please provide the names of the participants, the date of the meeting(s), and the topic of the meeting(s).
7. Are you aware of any communication between Trump Organization officials and Trump administration officials regarding your or other GEO executives' stay at the Trump International Hotel?
8. What was the total amount spent by GEO at the Trump International Hotel between January 20, 2017 and present?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress