

The Alaska Legislature

Official Business



State Capitol
Juneau, Alaska
99801-1182

October 23, 2019

Nancy Dahlstrom, Commissioner of the Department of Corrections

RE: DOC Request for Proposal soliciting bids to house incarcerated Alaskans out-of-state

Commissioner Dahlstrom:

We write today to express our grave concern about the Department of Corrections' (DOC) intention to issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) to solicit bids to house between 250 and 500 incarcerated Alaskans in Lower 48 for-profit prisons. Like many Alaskans, we strongly oppose this decision, which openly defies the legislature's appropriation authority by rejecting our action earlier this year to keep Alaskans in-state by reopening the Palmer Correctional Center (PCC.) We were surprised to learn of the administration's decision to disregard the legislature's authority as we received no communication from the DOC until the decision was publicly announced, just days before the RFP was to be issued.

This past June, the House of Representatives soundly rejected appropriating money for out-of-state incarceration in private prisons by a bipartisan vote of 29-to-6, based in part on the failure of the administration to offer a plausible justification for it. In order to meet the projected increase in prison population due to the passage of House Bill 49 – sweeping public safety legislation that strengthened criminal penalties across the board – the House approved \$16 million in the Fiscal Year 2020 budget to be used strictly for the purpose of reopening the PCC.

The DOC now claims an out-of-state contract is preferable because it would take twelve months and an additional 70 correctional officers to reopen the PCC, again with no plausible justification for that assertion. PCC is empty and available, and many Alaskans are eager to work in positions that will help make our state safe. Why then would this reopening take twelve months? The administration has thus far been unwilling or unable to answer this question. We respectfully request you provide this information. Additionally:

- Given the governor's stated priority of improving public safety in a state with chronically high crime rates, will contracting with out-of-state institutions improve public safety outcomes?
- Do you anticipate this move will reduce crime rates and recidivism?
- Given that Alaska Natives make up a disproportionate percentage of our prison population, will culturally appropriate programs be made available to them and other Alaskans as they would be in-state?

- Will substance abuse and mental health treatment, or job training or educational programs be available?
- Will Alaskans be housed in dedicated facilities in a segregated manner or mixed in with inmates from other states?

We would like answers to these questions, as the societal costs of this decision are significant. All evidence suggests incarcerating Alaskans in the Lower 48 not only tears apart families and communities, but it can also create more sophisticated criminals who will eventually return to Alaska. In 2012, Alaska began bringing out-of-state prisoners home. Much of the increased gang activity and violent crime has been directly attributed to Alaskans who spent time incarcerated outside.

Alaska has faced prison overcrowding before and ultimately rejected the notion that sending Alaskans to out-of-state facilities is the solution. The legislature again rejected this idea during its most recent session by appropriating money to keep prisoners housed in Alaska facilities, staffed and operated by Alaskans, with culturally appropriate programs proven to reduce recidivism and future crime.

Given the critical points raised in this letter, we respectfully request that the Department reverse its unilateral decision to issue an RFP, which is in violation of the legislature's appropriation authority. We also ask that the process of reopening the PCC begin immediately.

Thank you in advance for consideration and we eagerly await your response.

Sincerely,



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Rep. Harriet Drummond



Rep. Steve Thompson



Rep. Louise Stutes



Rep. Chuck Kopp



Rep. Neal Foster



Rep. Dan Ortiz



Rep. Adam Wool



Rep. Grier Hopkins



Rep. Sara Hannan



Rep. Tiffany Zulkosky



Rep. Bart LeBon



Rep. Chris Tuck



Rep. Andi Story



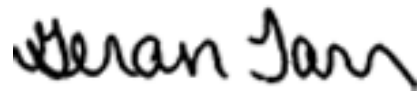
Rep. Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins



Rep. John Lincoln



Rep. Zack Fields



Rep. Geran Tarr



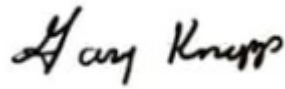
Rep. Andy Josephson



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CC:

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Kelly Goode, Deputy Commissioner/Legislative Liaison, Department of Corrections