

Our tax money is funding private prisons; let's fix this

BY AMANDA AGUILAR SHANK
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Today there are 2.3 million people in prison and 4.7 million on probation or parole in the U.S. There are a record-high 41,000 people in immigrant detention centers and 53,000 immigrants wearing ankle monitors. Every one of these people has family, has loved ones. Thousands of us are residents in this city.

I'd like to share the story of one Portlander who came to the United States from Guatemala at just 10 years old. Despite entering with refugee status, he was later detained for three years at Northwest Detention Center, a private for-profit immigration detention center in Tacoma, Wash. David (not his actual name) shared his experience:

"I was put in solitary confinement multiple different times, at one point for six continuous months. I had little to no interaction with other people and was subject to verbal and physical abuse daily. In the general population, the rooms were constantly overcrowded with people sleeping on the floors. The guards would physically force people who didn't speak English to sign deportation releases without their consent, and use excessive violence without any repercussions.

"I would work hard manual labor for up to eight hours and get paid only \$1 a day. On top of that, the prices of the products in commissary were all extremely expensive. A 15-minute phone call would cost \$10; collect calls were \$2.50 a minute. ... I asked if I could have a few GED books to study, but they refused and, in fact, said that immigrants should not be allowed to get an education, especially because they shouldn't been in the U.S. in the first place."

Despite rolling hunger strikes and unlivable conditions, it's estimated that

approximately 1,000 immigrants, 10 percent of them youths, were transferred to the Northwest Detention Center from Portland in 2015.

Northwest Detention Center is owned and operated by the private for-profit corporation GEO Group, under a per-person, per-day contract with the federal government. Prison corporations like GEO Group not only run prisons and detention centers like the one in Tacoma; they also lobby heavily for policies that funnel people to these facilities.

In 2014, GEO Group and CoreCivic (formerly Corrections Corporation of America), the two largest prison corporations in the U.S., spent \$5.9 million on lobbying and campaign contributions. Their investment has paid off. Private corporations now control 73 percent of immigrant detention beds, and a GEO subsidiary has an exclusive contract with ICE for electronic ankle monitoring. Women with their children as young as infants are now being detained. Some people are held for one, two, three years, even with no criminal charges against them.

In the criminal system, prisons have lobbied for mandatory minimums like Oregon's Measure 11, three-strikes laws and truth in sentencing laws, which disproportionately impact communities of color, particularly black communities. Increased criminalization makes shareholders more money, at the expense of people's lives.

Whose money is fueling all of this? Ours. The city of Portland's.

Wells Fargo, JPMorgan Chase and a handful of other banks are major investors and lenders in prisons. The city of Portland currently holds millions in corporate bonds from these banks, and no screen is available to prevent our money

from being invested in prison expansion.

Wells Fargo is also implicated as a major funder of the Dakota Access Pipeline that the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and allies are courageously blocking in North Dakota, as well as in a widespread scandal that opened millions of false bank accounts. Portland can do better than this. The money we pay in taxes to our cities should not be turned back on us to fuel a system that dehumanizes us, defrauds us, destroys our natural resources and locks us away.

Soon, prison divestment will be up for a vote at the Portland City Council. We have the opportunity to set a national precedent that other cities will follow, to help financially isolate the prison industry and to stop its growth.

Like many of you, I am still reeling from Trump's victory with a campaign rooted in racism and xenophobia. He has pledged to deport 2 million to 3 million immigrants "immediately," to expand the use of private prisons, to make Muslims join a government registry - to name but a few of his deplorable policy objectives. In this context, the actions that the City Council takes will ring especially loud, particularly in the ears of Portland's immigrant community and communities of color.

Dozens of community groups stand with the Prison Divestment Coalition and will be testifying from 2 to 5 p.m. on Nov. 30 at City Hall.

We call on the public to join us with signs and support, to let City Council know that we support them in cutting our city's ties with the prison industry.

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