

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 15, 2020

Mr. Joseph V. Cuffari
Inspector General
Department of Homeland Security
Office of Inspector General
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Mr. Cuffari:

We write to express deep concern for the health and welfare of immigrants in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) who are currently detained at the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC), operated by LaSalle Corrections. We are horrified to see reports of mass hysterectomies performed on detained women in the facility, without their full, informed consent and request that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) conduct an immediate investigation.¹ We request that your office immediately open an investigation to thoroughly examine allegations raised by whistleblower Dawn Wooten and immigrants currently and formerly detained in the ICDC.²

In the complaint submitted to your office outlining the concerns by Ms. Wooten and numerous immigrants who have spoken to Project South, there is wide concern about the high rates of hysterectomies performed on detained women. One detained immigrant reported that she knew five women who had hysterectomies within a three-month period between October and December, 2019. This woman likened the facility to an “experimental concentration camp” and Nurse Wooten said that hysterectomies were that doctor’s “specialty, he’s the uterus collector.” While Ms. Wooten noted that some of the women who had hysterectomies reported heavy menstruation or other severe issues, the high rates of hysterectomies were seemingly inexplicable and remarkably concerning.

The complaint also raised questions as to whether there was proper, informed consent by many of the women who had hysterectomies. Ms. Wooten claims that several of the women who had hysterectomies did not know why they even went to the doctor. Further, she reports that the language line was not consistently used by medical staff and some nurses attempted to communicate with the Spanish-speaking detained women using Google or asking other detained immigrants to interpret. One immigrant woman explained her experience receiving three

¹ Kari Paul, *ICE Detainees Faced Medical Neglect and Hysterectomies, Whistleblower Alleges*, THE GUARDIAN (Sept. 14, 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/14/ice-detainees-hysterectomies-medical-neglect-irwin-georgia>.

² Project South, Georgia Detention Watch, Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, and South Georgia Immigrant Support Network, *Re: Lack of Medical Care, Unsafe Work Practices, and Absence of Adequate Protection Against COVID-19 for Detained Immigrants and Employees Alike at the Irwin County Detention Center* (Sept. 14, 2020) <https://projectsouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OIG-ICDC-Complaint-1.pdf>.

different explanations as to why she was going to have a hysterectomy, and said that she “felt like they were trying to mess with my body.” She reports that a nurse became angry and yelled at her for expressing that she thought the procedure was not appropriate for her.

These reports hearken back to a dark time in U.S. history in which 32 states passed eugenic-sterilization laws, resulting in the sterilization of between 60 and 70 thousand people in the early 1900s.³ This practice continued for incarcerated individuals into recent times, as nearly 150 incarcerated women in California prisons were sterilized between 2006 and 2010.⁴ In Georgia alone, 3,284 individuals had been sterilized by the end of 1963, as the state was responsible for the fifth highest number of sterilizations in the country.⁵ This shameful history of sterilization in the United States, in particular sterilization of people of color and incarcerated people, must never be repeated. Yet, the similarities to the accounts of immigrant women and nurses in the Irwin County Detention Center today are eerily similar.

The reports of mass hysterectomies cause grave concern for the violation of the bodily autonomy and reproductive rights of detained people. Everyone, regardless of their immigration status, their language, or their incarceration deserves to control their own reproductive choices, and make informed choices about their bodies. We request an immediate investigation into these reports. We request a response and a briefing on the status of this investigation by Friday, September 25, 2020.

Sincerely,

PRAMILA JAYAPAL
Member of Congress

JUDY CHU
Member of Congress

JERROLD NADLER
Member of Congress

ZOE LOFGREN
Member of Congress

³ Andrea DenHoed, *The Forgotten Lessons of the American Eugenics Movement*, THE NEW YORKER (April 27, 2016) <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-forgotten-lessons-of-the-american-eugenics-movement>.

⁴ Lisa Ko, *Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States*, NPR (Jan. 29, 2016).

⁵ Lutz Kaelber, *Eugenics: Compulsory Sterilization in 50 American States*, Presentation from the 2012 Social Science History Association, <https://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/>.

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