

HENRY C. "HANK" JOHNSON, JR.  
4TH DISTRICT, GEORGIA

COMMITTEES:

JUDICIARY

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

SENIOR WHIP

REGION VIII WHIP

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515-1004

SUBCOMMITTEES:

CHAIRMAN

COURTS, INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, AND  
THE INTERNET

ANTITRUST, COMMERCIAL, AND  
ADMINISTRATIVE LAW

HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT

AVIATION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC  
BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

The Honorable Matthew T. Albence  
Deputy Director  
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement  
500 12th St., SW  
Washington, D.C. 20536

May 7, 2020

Dear Mr. Albence,

I write to express my concerns regarding the threat COVID-19 poses to the Stewart Detention Center in south west Georgia and to ascertain what, if any, steps are being taken to protect the detainees and staff at this facility. With a demonstrated history of human rights abuses, poor operating conditions, and close proximity to Dougherty County which holds the second-highest number of COVID-19 cases in Georgia, it is imperative that all detainees at Stewart Detention Center be given the same protections as every other American during the coronavirus pandemic.

In the Stewart Detention Center, where many detainees live in open floor pods that contain up to sixty people on rows of bunk beds, the CDC recommended practice of social distancing is impossible to implement. Additionally, Dougherty County, located an hour away from the Stewart Detention Center, has the second-highest number of COVID-19 cases in Georgia. These factors make the facility incredibly vulnerable to mass spread of the very contagious Coronavirus. I am concerned that the proactive steps being taken by ICE may not be sufficient to protect the almost 2,000 detainees inside the facility.

Over forty detained immigrants have been brought into the facility each day this past week. Due to recent studies showing that COVID-19 has a long incubation period and asymptomatic carriers of the virus could be fueling its spread, if just one new asymptomatic detainee entered the facility under its current operating conditions, it is likely that hundreds of detainees will become infected. Likewise, employees who fail to practice basic health and safety precautions when they enter or exit the facility, such as wearing gloves and using hand sanitizer, put every detainee at risk of exposure to the virus.

If an outbreak were to happen, it would only add to the long list of human rights abuses reported at the Stewart Detention Center. In a letter written by Project South on October 17, 2019, one-hundred Georgia and national organizations called for a full investigation of the Stewart Detention Center detailing terrible conditions inside the facility: overcrowding, understaffed medical personnel, disregard of medical needs, verbal and physical abuse, accessibility concerns, and insufficient nutrition with irregular mealtimes.

In January 2018, 33-year-old Yulio Castro-Garrido died of pneumonia while detained at Stewart despite being healthy prior to detention. According to ICE's own detainee death review, the Stewart staff violated

HENRY C. "HANK" JOHNSON, JR.  
4TH DISTRICT, GEORGIA

COMMITTEES:

JUDICIARY

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

SENIOR WHIP

REGION VIII WHIP

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515-1004

SUBCOMMITTEES:

CHAIRMAN

COURTS, INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, AND  
THE INTERNET

ANTITRUST, COMMERCIAL, AND  
ADMINISTRATIVE LAW

HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT

AVIATION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC  
BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

protocol and failed to monitor Garrido's blood pressure after signs of stage two hypertension. Moreover, officers at Stewart did not comply with their own standards and failed to suspend Garrido from the work program when they became aware of his illness. Garrido continued to work in the kitchen despite his fever, cough, and runny nose up until the day he was hospitalized and taken away in an ambulance. If such human rights abuses continue to happen during this international pandemic, the death toll will almost certainly reach far beyond a single detainee.

I request a response to the following questions no later than 15 calendar days from your receipt of this letter:

1. Are you testing new detainees for COVID-19 as they enter the facility?
2. Do you have plans to limit the number of incoming detainees in the face of this crisis?
3. What steps are you taking to implement social distancing techniques recommended by the CDC and to keep inmates safely separated?
4. After the death of Yulio Castro-Garrido, what steps did you take to improve healthcare in the facility?
5. What specific steps are employees taking before entering and exiting the facility to ensure the health and safety of all detainees? Do you have sufficient PPE to protect both detainees and staff?
6. On April 9, ICE admitted to 30 "suspected" cases at Stewart in a sworn declaration. (Attached to this email.)
  - a. As of today, the agency is only reporting 7 cases at Stewart on its website:  
<https://www.ice.gov/coronavirus>
  - b. How many people at Stewart have COVID-19? And how can we be sure the agency is testing people if they are not saying how many tests have been administered?
7. What steps are you taking for people showing symptoms?
  - a. Is there room for each one of them to be isolated for 14 days or are they staying in their units with other detained individuals?
  - b. What steps are being taken to identify and protect especially vulnerable people, i.e. those with hypertension, diabetes, and other conditions placing them at high-risk of complications if they contract COVID-19?
8. ICE used violence in response to a protest at Stewart on April 9. Several detained people and their relatives confirmed to SPLC that ICE deployed pepper spray and use of force last week in response to those protesting for their release in one of the dorms.
  - a. How will ICE be held accountable for their violence at Stewart?

Sincerely,



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress

WASHINGTON OFFICE  
2240 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
PHONE (202) 225-1605  
FAX (202) 226-0691

DECATUR OFFICE  
5240 SNAPPER PARK DRIVE, SUITE 140  
DECATUR, GA 30035  
PHONE (770) 987-2291  
FAX (770) 987-8721