

May 12, 2011

The Honorable Eric Holder
Attorney General, United States of America
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

Re: A nationwide search for the new Director of the Bureau of Prisons

Dear Attorney General Holder,

We represent a broad array of religious, political, human rights, and civil rights groups united in our dedication to safe, humane, and effective criminal justice in the United States. In particular we are concerned about the health and welfare of over 200,000 prisoners in the custody of the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), the thousands of employees of that agency, and the public at large.

As the BOP transitions due to changes in leadership, we believe an opportunity has arisen to review and reevaluate the priorities of this vital institution and implement a plan to accomplish a new and innovative approach that utilizes the best research, knowledge and thinking about corrections policy. To advance that objective we urge you to engage in a serious, thorough, nationwide search for the Director of the BOP. The BOP is an enormous agency that uses a great deal of public resources. It also serves a critical public function. Every day the staff of BOP is responsible for the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, and the work of this agency impacts the safety and health of our communities and the nation as a whole.

Currently, the BOP is an agency in transition, but we encourage the Department to consider this moment as an opportunity to appoint strong, thoughtful leadership aimed at genuine reform. In the last twenty years the federal prison population has quadrupled in size without the necessary change in management philosophy or institutional culture. Indeed, BOP is an agency which now functions at nearly 140% capacity where prisoners are warehoused, rather than rehabilitated, and both staff and prisoners are routinely put at risk due to dangerous conditions. Unfortunately, the agency has not adapted its management strategy to take full advantage of the diverse population reduction authorities and cost-savings measures given to it by Congress, such as: expanded half-way house placement, compassionate release, and sentence reduction programs like good time and drug program participation. The consequence of this inaction is that the BOP has grown more bloated and more dangerous over time.

In contrast to BOP's past strategies, relying on the building and expansion of prisons cannot be the first and only response to overcrowding and its related programming failures and safety risks. This is especially true now that we face historic budget deficits and hard choices about where best to use scarce resources. It is now incumbent on every public official to adopt new policies and forge new paths in order to ensure that precious taxpayer dollars are not squandered on systems that do not maximize efficiency and effectiveness.

In light of these challenges, the next Director must be an individual with experience in systems reform and change. She or he must also have the courage and commitment to lower recidivism rates, improve conditions in BOP facilities, focus on rehabilitation and re-entry, and improve public safety through reforms in correctional practice and strategy. The new Director must also be able to lead the agency through a time of transition, renewal, and cultural change. And she or he must be able to make difficult, informed and independent decisions that are best for the welfare and safety of BOP personnel and prisoners and the public at large.

The federal prison system should serve as a model of innovation and effectiveness in corrections, while maintaining safety and security. We urge you to endorse this vision of system reform by selecting a national leader with experience and commitment to change for the next BOP Director.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union
Criminal Justice Policy Foundation
DC CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants)
DC Prisoners' Project of the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs
Drug Policy Alliance
Florida Justice Institute, Inc
International CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants)
Just Detention International
Justice Policy Institute
Law Enforcement Against Prohibition
NAACP
National Association of Social Workers
Open Society Policy Center
Penal Reform International/The Americas
Pretrial Justice Institute
Safe Streets Arts Foundation
StoptheDrugWar.org
TASH
The Rebecca Project for Human Rights
The Sentencing Project
The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions
United Methodist General Board of Church & Society
University Legal Services (Washington, DC)
Uptown People's Law Center (Chicago, IL)