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### **OIG Report Confirms Whistleblower Claims of Wrongdoing at Irwin County Detention Center**

WASHINGTON- Yesterday the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) released its final report, "Medical Processes and Communication Protocols Need Improvement at Irwin County Detention Center" outlining Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) grave shortcomings in medical healthcare at the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC), an ICE facility owned and operated by LaSalle Corrections, a private prison company. The findings validate disclosures made to the OIG and Congress in September 2020 by Government Accountability Project's client, ICDC nurse Dawn Wooten, as well as ICE detainees, regarding failures to protect workers and immigrants from COVID-19 and inadequate medical care at the rural Georgia facility. While Ms. Wooten's disclosures, and in part, the OIG's report, reveal a toxic and dangerous culture within one ICE detention facility, the findings are symptomatic of an immigration detention system at large that has consistently proven unable to protect both workers and immigrants. Ms. Wooten's whistleblower disclosures, which also included high rates of unnecessary, nonconsensual gynecological procedures performed on women in detention, went viral in September 2020, prompting Congressional investigations and resolutions, a class action lawsuit on behalf of survivors, and international public outcry. Ultimately, DHS Secretary Mayorkas in May 2021 ordered ICE to sever its contract with ICDC, and in September 2021, all remaining immigrant detainees were transferred out of the facility. A separate OIG investigation and audit is being conducted into the processes for approving gynecological procedures at ICDC and for all surgeries across ICE detention facilities. Ms. Wooten's disclosures about ICE's and LaSalle's failure to implement COVID protocols provided vital first-hand examples of the endangerment of workers, immigrants, and the public posed by the spread of COVID in ICE detention-warnings issued at the beginning of the pandemic by DHS's own medical experts. The OIG, while concluding that ICDC "generally complied with CDC and ICE COVID-19 guidance," also detailed several areas in which ICE and ICDC fell woefully short in critical ways. The OIG found that ICDC failed to "adequately implement and enforce social distancing protocols;" that "confusion at the beginning of the pandemic made for a late and inconsistent implementation of mask distribution and wearing;" and that even a year after the beginning of the pandemic, video footage from March 2021 showed "facility staff not wearing masks and social distancing." Further, the OIG found that "CDC and ICE management did not adequately or consistently keep facility employees, ICE staff, and detainees informed of COVID-19 protocols and guidance" and that "detainees reported not being informed of their cohort or quarantine status, their COVID-19 test results, or facility COVID-19 protocols." The OIG's investigation into medical care at ICDC and subsequent findings not only validate Ms. Wooten's disclosures regarding ICDC but are consistent with its earlier findings about failures at other ICE detention facilities to adequately protect workers and immigrants-and thus the public too-from COVID, including at the Richwood Correctional Center, also run by LaSalle. This report should not be viewed as irrelevant because ICDC is closed, but rather as a case study in why this system - locking up immigrants en masse without adequate safeguards during a pandemic - is an ongoing public health disaster. Dana Gold, Government Accountability Project Senior Counsel and lead counsel for Ms. Wooten commented: "We are gratified that the OIG's report largely validates many of the problems disclosed by Ms. Wooten. Yet we remain frustrated that the very whistleblower whose disclosures led to this important report continues to wait for a decision on her whistleblower retaliation complaint filed with the OIG more than fifteen months ago. Ms. Wooten's disclosures prompted DHS to conduct investigations that have resulted in accountability and an end to mismanagement and abuses at ICDC, but Ms. Wooten herself, a single Black mother of five struggling to provide for her family, continues to suffer the adverse effects of retaliation. We hope that the DHS OIG will now take care of the whistleblower who served the public interest by choosing to speak up instead of stay silent." Katie Shepherd, Immigration Counsel for Government Accountability Project stated: "ICDC is not an outlier - it is reflective of a toxic, harmful immigration system lacking accountability. The OIG's recent findings illustrate ICE's and LaSalle's failures to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and safeguard detainees and workers alike from harm not just at ICDC but at ICE facilities across the country. The report adds to the chorus of complaints, expert reports, Congressional investigations, and whistleblower disclosures detailing the extensive and egregious harms caused by the mass incarceration of thousands of individuals in substandard conditions and reflects the critical and immediate need for systemic change."