

Immigration Detention Company Top Donor To Texas Congressmen

One of the country's largest operators of private immigration detention facilities has made significant contributions to several Texas members of Congress.

The **GEO Group's PAC** and executives have given \$32,900 to Houston Republican Rep. John Culberson's campaign this election cycle, according to Federal Election Commission documents and OpenSecrets.org. GEO is Culberson's largest donor.

In Texas, GEO operates detention centers for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Karnes City, Laredo, Pearsall and Conroe.

Culberson received the most funding from GEO out of Texas members of Congress, but GEO is also the top donor this cycle for U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo, who received \$32,400, and Round Rock Republican Rep. John Carter, who received \$31,600. These House members top the list of Geo Group contributions directly under Florida Senator Rick Scott's \$70,400

Both Culberson and Cuellar serve on the House Appropriations Homeland Security Subcommittee, which funds private immigration detention centers. Culberson is also the chairman of and Carter serves on the House Appropriations subcommittee on commerce, justice and science, which oversees funding for private prisons.

In the 2016 election cycle, private prisons gave a record \$1.6 million to candidates, parties and outside spending groups. That was nearly triple what they'd given in 2014 and more than double their contributions in the 2012 presidential cycle. Most of the increase came in the form of donations to outside groups, and Geo Group was responsible for most of that: It gave \$300,000 to super PACs backing various Republican presidential candidates, including one backing now-President Donald Trump.

Of the 2016 contributions that went to candidates or parties, 85 percent went to Republicans. That's higher than in most previous cycles, but consistent with the conservative leanings of this industry. Since 1990, private prisons have given 73 percent of their total party-and-candidate contributions to Republicans.

Including its super PAC gifts, GEO Group was the top contributor from the industry by far in the 2016 election cycle, giving more than \$1.2 million.

Private prisons' outlays for lobbying were the highest in nine years -- \$2.75 million -- as the industry tried to fight back against then-President Obama's efforts to make less use of their facilities. Here, CoreCivic (formerly Corrections Corp. of America) led the spending with about \$1.1 million devoted to lobbying.

opensecrets.org



NO FURNITURE FOR BORDER CAMPS

Hundreds of US staff at furniture giant **Wayfair** have walked out after the firm sold furnishings to border camps in Texas used to detain immigrants. Employees gathered outside Wayfair's Boston HQ after more than 500 staff signed a letter urging the firm to **"cease all business with border camps"**. Wayfair sold about \$200,000 (£157,690) in bedroom furniture to a detention centre for migrant children. Some in the crowd carried signs with messages including **"a cage is not a home"** and **"a prison with a bed is still a prison"**.

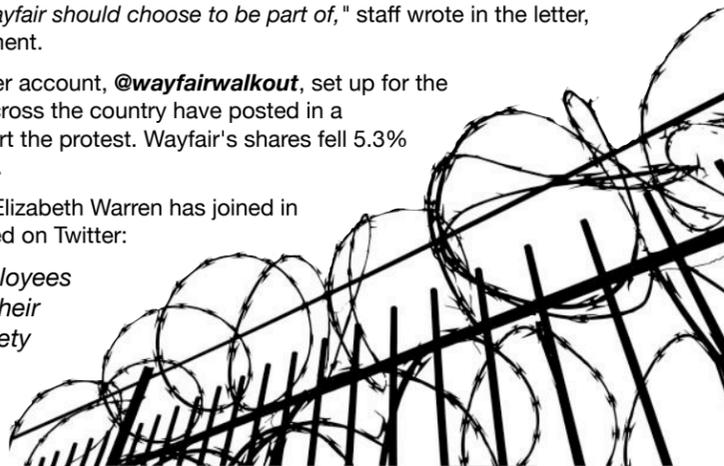
"We believe that the current actions of the United States and their contractors at the Southern border do not represent an ethical business partnership Wayfair should choose to be part of," staff wrote in the letter, which was addressed to Wayfair's management.

Almost 22,000 people have followed a Twitter account, **@wayfairwalkout**, set up for the protest, and staff from other Wayfair sites across the country have posted in a Facebook event asking how they can support the protest. Wayfair's shares fell 5.3% on Tuesday, but were up 1% on Wednesday.

Democratic presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren has joined in the conversation on social media. She posted on Twitter:

"I stand with hundreds of @Wayfair employees who are planning to stage a walkout at their Boston headquarters tomorrow. The safety and well-being of immigrant children is always worth fighting for."

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IN YOUR FACE: Inside the Secret Border Patrol Facebook

Created in August 2016, members of a **secret Facebook group for current and former Border Patrol agents** joked about the deaths of migrants, discussed throwing burritos at Latino members of Congress visiting a detention facility in Texas on Monday and posted a vulgar illustration depicting Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez engaged in oral sex with a detained migrant, according to screenshots of their postings, with another showing her with Trump.

In one exchange, group members responded with indifference and wisecracks to the post of a news story about a 16-year-old Guatemalan migrant who died in May while in custody at a Border Patrol station in Weslaco, Texas. One member posted a GIF of Elmo with the quote, "Oh well." Another responded with an image and the words "If he dies, he dies."

The Facebook group is called **"I'm 10-15"** and boasts roughly 9,500 members. Approximately 20,000 agents serve under the broader *U.S. Customs and Border Protection* agency from across the country. (10-15 is Border Patrol code for "aliens in custody.") The group described itself, in an online introduction, as a forum for "funny" and "serious" discussion about work with the patrol. **"Remember you are never alone in this family,"** the introduction said.

Responsible for policing the nation's southern and northern boundaries, the Border Patrol has come under intense scrutiny as the Trump administration takes new, more aggressive measures to halt the influx of undocumented migrants across the United States-Mexico border. The patrol, has been faulted **for mistreating children and adults** in its custody. The agency's leadership has been in turmoil, with its most recent acting chief, John Sanders, resigning last week.

ProPublica received images of several recent discussions in the 10-15 Facebook group and was able to link the participants in those online conversations to apparently legitimate Facebook profiles belonging to Border Patrol agents, including a supervisor based in El Paso, Texas, and an agent in Eagle Pass, Texas. ProPublica has so far been unable to reach the group members who made the postings. ProPublica contacted spokespeople for Customs and Border Patrol in regard to the Facebook group and provided the names of the agents who appear to have participated in the online chats. There has been no response

"These comments and memes are extremely troubling," said Daniel Martinez, a sociologist at the University of Arizona in Tucson who studies the border. "The postings, in his view, reflect what **"seems to be a pervasive culture of cruelty aimed at immigrants within Customs and Border Patrol. This isn't just a few rogue agents or 'bad apples.'"**

And in early 2018, federal investigators found a raft of disturbing and racist text messages sent by Border Patrol agents in southern Arizona after searching the phone of Matthew Bowen, an agent charged with running down a Guatemalan migrant with a Ford F-150 pickup truck. The texts, which were revealed in a court filing in federal court in Tucson, described migrants as "guats," "wild ass shitbags," "beaners" and "subhuman." The messages included repeated discussions about burning the migrants up. Several of the postings reviewed by *ProPublica* refer to the planned visit by members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, including Ocasio-Cortez and Rep. Veronica Escobar, to a troubled Border Patrol facility outside of El Paso. Agents at the compound in Clint, Texas, have been accused of holding children in neglectful, inhumane conditions.

Members of the Border Patrol Facebook group were not enthused about the tour, noting that Ocasio-Cortez, a Democrat from Queens, had compared Border Patrol facilities to Nazi concentration camps. Escobar is a freshman Democrat representing El Paso. One member encouraged Border Patrol agents to hurl a **"burrito at these bitches."** Another, apparently a patrol supervisor, wrote, **"Fuck the hoers."** A third member posted that **"there should be no photo ops for these scum buckets,"** posted a third member.

Perhaps the most disturbing posts target Ocasio-Cortez. One includes a photo illustration of her engaged in oral sex at an immigrant detention center. Text accompanying the image reads, **"Lucky Illegal Immigrant Glory Hole Special Starring AOC."** Another is a photo illustration of a smiling President Donald Trump forcing Ocasio-Cortez's head toward his crotch. The agent who posted the image commented: **"That's right bitches. The masses have spoken and today democracy won."**

The head of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Joaquin Castro, reviewed the Facebook discussions and was incensed. **"It confirms some of the worst criticisms of Customs and Border Protection,"** said Castro, a Democrat who represents San Antonio. **"These are clearly agents who are desensitized to the point of being dangerous to migrants and their co-workers."** He added that the agents who made the vulgar comments **"don't deserve to wear any uniform representing the United States of America."**

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If you have any information about the Border Patrol you'd like to share, please email us at borderpatrol@propublica.org. Check out our more secure ways to send us information.

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