

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 23, 2019

The Honorable Dr. Joseph V. Cuffari
Office of Inspector General/MAIL STOP 0305
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
245 Murray Lane SW
Washington, DC 20528-0305

Dear Inspector General Cuffari:

We write to express our deep concerns regarding the use of solitary confinement at the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) in Tacoma, Washington. According to news reports, several hundred individuals have been held in solitary confinement at the NWDC between 2013 and 2017. Local activists also have indicated that detainees have been placed in solitary confinement in retaliation for complaining about poor conditions at the NWDC. These reports are deeply troubling especially considering the known negative impacts that solitary confinement can have on the physical and mental health of individuals regardless of the duration of time they are held in isolation.

The misuse of solitary confinement at immigration detention centers was highlighted in a report issued by your office on June 3, 2019. Following inspections at four detention facilities, the report found overly restrictive and inappropriate segregation practices at three of the detention facilities, violating U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention standards and infringing on individual rights.

The tragic death of Mergensana Amar, a Russian asylum seeker who was held at the NWDC last year, once again raised concerns about the use of solitary confinement. Before his death on November 24, 2018, Mr. Amar had been on a hunger strike for three months and placed in an isolated cell that reportedly lacked adequate provisions and monitoring. Days after being placed in solitary confinement, Mr. Amar tragically took his own life. While we welcome the decision by your predecessor, John Kelly, to open an investigation surrounding Mr. Amar's death, it is clear a broader atmosphere of abuse and mistreatment exists at the NWDC.

We understand that your office conducted an inspection of the NWDC in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 and is currently conducting a review and preparing a report on its findings. As part of this review, we urge you to take a close look at the policies and practices related to solitary confinement and other reported abuses at the NWDC that have impacted the health, safety and legal rights of individuals held in the facility. A thorough review by your office is critical to holding ICE and the GEO Group, the private contractor operating the NWDC, accountable for the treatment of individuals at the NWDC.

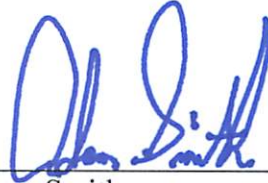
Separately, we urge you to complete the report on the tragic death of Mergensana Amar. It has been almost a year since this investigation began. It is imperative that the investigation is completed in a timely manner and if possible for the results to be made public.

We appreciate your prompt attention regarding the pattern of abuses and dangerous conditions that have been reported within the NWDC and look forward to discussing the results of your investigations with you.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Adam Smith
Member of Congress

cc: U.S. Department of Homeland Security Legislative Affairs