



**California Faith Leaders to Governor Newsom:
“Fulfill Your Promise to End the Devastating Impact of
For-Profit Prisons in Our Communities”**

August 27, 2019

To Governor Gavin Newsom:

We are faith leaders, ministers, rabbis, imams, and people of faith from across California. We are writing to urge you to sign a clean AB32, sponsored by Assemblyman Rob Bonta, and end California’s complicity with for-profit correctional institutions and detention facilities.

As religious leaders, many of us serve populations ravaged by the incarceration of people of color and the detention of immigrants. We have seen the devastating impact of prisons and detention facilities on people’s lives, children, families, and our communities.

We come from many different faith traditions, but we share common values. Our shared beliefs tell us that every human being has divine worth, regardless of the color of their skin, their immigration status, or their worst action. Everyone deserves justice, compassion, equal rights, and humane treatment. Sacred texts call us to welcome migrants with acts of hospitality and free the prisoners. To practice forgiveness, to restore, and to heal the breaches in our society.

Drawing on this common core of faith, we urge you to end the state’s support for companies that earn financial profit from the incarceration and detention of thousands of Californians. Please support AB32 and reject any amendments that would delay, diminish, or mitigate its effect. We propose four reasons to act:

First, for-profit prisons damage our communities. These corporations have a financial incentive to lobby for harsh punishments and long sentences, clearly a conflict of interest. Private prisons are notorious for abusive treatment, including abysmal health and safety conditions. (Today, there are active lawsuits against GEO Group, Inc. and CoreCivic, Inc. for poor conditions.) These abuses are connected to a lack of oversight: private prisons lack the transparency and regulatory oversight that public prisons guarantee. In this current political moment, private prison companies have been at the center of the national scandal around the imprisoning of migrant children.

Secondly, private prisons violate our moral code. We believe deeply that a safe society need not be one that locks up its most disadvantaged members. Instead of building prisons, our state should invest in solutions that begin with a more equitable California and ensuring housing, education, healthcare, mental health support and meaningful employment to all. Research-backed community solutions have been proven to be more effective at rehabilitation



and reducing crime than incarceration, while aligning with our moral and ethical values. Those being detained for civil immigration violations need not be held in prisons, but reliable alternative solutions exist.

Third, the public is with us. The majority of Californians support an end to for-profit prisons. Indeed, you know this well, for you, Governor Newsom, campaigned on this issue. Your website declares that for-profit prisons “contribute to over-incarceration.” In your January inaugural address, you promised to “end the outrage that is private prisons in the state of California once and for all.”

Fourth, the time to act is now. As we write, ICE is looking for sites in California to expand the detention of children, adults and families. 71% of immigrants in detention are being held in for-profit prisons and the Trump Administration is side-stepping California legislation to curb immigration detention by seeking direct contracts with private prison companies. The danger is real that the agency could enter into fifty-year contracts in 2020 that would enshrine privately-managed immigration detention in the state of California for generations to come.

California has risen to the occasion before. We have taken steps to end the cycle of punishment and recidivism, and to shift our criminal justice system to reform and rehabilitation. We have passed legislation to protect those targeted by ICE detention and deportation. AB32 builds on this legacy.

We close with the words of Curtis Yarbrough, a former California prisoner who was held inside a CoreCivic prison: “Financial resources used to pay private prison contracts should instead be used to change wrecked lives into whole lives, to heal and build broken lives into productive assets in our communities.”

Please sign AB32 and reject amendments that would allow the state to backtrack on our commitment in the future. (Any “safety valve” language that allows private prisons as a backstop will only insure that for-profit prisons expand their aggressive lobbying efforts to swell the state’s prison population.) The CDCR itself reports monthly that the implementation of Prop 57, which has just begun, and the elderly parole program are making significant strides to reducing our prison population.

Any changes or amendments to this bill would also compromise on the solidarity that has developed between communities who are battling criminal incarceration and immigration detention. We stand united both in our moral principles and in the language of this bill. Any changes to that would be unacceptable.



We are asking for your leadership, to stand against the Trump Administration and end our state's involvement with for-profit private prisons, today one of Trump's leading weapons of cruelty and racism.

Our prayers are with you as you make this important decision. Please stand with our congregations, with the people of California, and with our shared moral values.

Sincerely,

(*affiliation for identification purposes)