

VERONICA ESCOBAR
16TH DISTRICT, TEXAS

FRESHMAN CO-REPRESENTATIVE TO LEADERSHIP

ASSISTANT WHIP

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS

HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTION,
CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION
AND CITIZENSHIP



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1505 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-4831

EL PASO OFFICE:
221 N. KANSAS STREET, SUITE 1500
EL PASO, TX 79901
(915) 541-1400

<http://escobar.house.gov>

April 3, 2020

Joseph Cuffari
Inspector General
Office of Inspector General/MAIL STOP 0305
Department of Homeland Security
245 Murray Lane SW
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Inspector General Cuffari:

I write to urge you to immediately inspect Border Patrol Station One in El Paso, Texas to determine whether CBP is taking proper precautions to protect detainees and staff from the spread of COVID-19. Alarming reports have surfaced from legal service providers in the region detailing that CBP is holding individuals in dangerous conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic requires that we utilize prudence and prevention with the utmost urgency, and the best possible course of action would be utilizing alternatives to detention for the health, safety and welfare of detainees and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) personnel. We are living in an unprecedented time that calls for decisive action to prevent further spread of the virus.

Detainees report that the conditions at Border Patrol Station One are wholly inappropriate.¹ Examples include:

- a single holding area of 150 detainees with flu-like conditions;
- failure to abide by social distancing guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention;
- inadequate access to basic hygienic supplies like soap and toilet paper; and
- a lack of proper medical screenings.

¹ See complaint attached

In the midst of this pandemic, it is urgent that your agency investigate these reports immediately. If CBP continues with this degree of inaction, there could be a severe outbreak of COVID-19 among this vulnerable population and throughout the entire El Paso region. The long-term impact on both the health of my constituents and the more than \$80 billion in annual trade in our region would further devastate the nation's economy.²

Further, your agency should review the larger COVID-19 protocols agency-wide to get an accurate account of what is occurring in detention centers. While U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) offers publicly available data on its website relating to confirmed cases among detainees and staff, CBP has no such mechanism to date.³ In fact, CBP has refused to provide any data when requested explicitly.⁴ The health and safety of all is paramount, including for those in our custody. At a minimum, the following data must be gathered and publicly reported:

1. How many people apprehended by Border Patrol or found inadmissible by CBP OFO since March 11, 2020 have been:
 - a. held in a CBP detention facilities, by sector,
 - b. screened for COVID-19 related symptoms,
 - c. referred for further medical treatment for COVID-19 related symptoms,
 - d. diagnosed with COVID-19,
 - e. transferred to a hospital or released due to COVID-19 or COVID-19-related symptoms, or released base on medical vulnerabilities related to COVID-19,
 - f. referred for credible fear or non-refoulement interview, and
 - g. transferred to ICE custody.
2. For those held in DHS custody after March 11, how long, on average, have they spent in CBP or ICE facilities?
3. What steps the agency has taken to ensure social distancing and hand washing guidelines recommended by public health experts are followed in CBP and ICE facilities?
4. Information on the presence of COVID-19 in CBP facilities and among their staff.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sincerely,



Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress

² <https://comptroller.texas.gov/economy/economic-data/ports/el-paso.php>

³ <https://www.ice.gov/coronavirus>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/BobMooreNews/status/1245355631701344256>