



April 8, 2024

Honorable James Comer
Chairman, House Oversight Committee
2410 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Comer:

I write to you in support of the sound policies of H.R. 3019, the *Federal Prison Oversight Act*. This bipartisan, bicameral bill will increase transparency and accountability within the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Increased visibility into the functioning of and problems with the BOP is essential to prevent harm to correctional officers, staff, and inmates in BOP facilities, as well as to assist the BOP in reaching its goal of rehabilitating offenders and prioritizing public safety. Heightened transparency will also give Congress the tools to be better stewards of the taxpayer dollar by choosing how to appropriate and authorize spending based on reports and information about the BOP.

The BOP employs over 34,000 people and is responsible for over 150,000 inmates. The budget of this agency is over \$8 billion. Yet, despite this hefty price tag to the taxpayer and its massive personnel responsibility, BOP is a deeply flawed agency. As evidenced from several congressional hearings¹ and government watchdog reports², federal prisons are understaffed, underfunded, overcrowded, unsafe, in disrepair, and subject to criminal activity (including, but certainly not limited to, smuggling contraband and sexual assault). A prison system rife with internal strain makes it difficult to ensure the safety of its employees and inmates. It also makes it hard for incarcerated individuals to successfully rehabilitate themselves so that they are less likely to reoffend upon reentering society. Despite this, the BOP has largely functioned without much accountability. As the maxim goes, “sunlight is the best disinfectant.” As such, increased visibility into the BOP will improve this broken system.

And that is why the *Federal Prison Oversight Act* is so important. H.R. 3019 contains two main provisions to improve the safety and accountability of our federal prison system. Under the bill, the BOP would be subject to independent oversight by the Department of Justice’s Office of Inspector General and individual complaints would be investigated by an independent Ombudsman. Incidents of violence against staff and incarcerated people, overuse of staffing augmentation, inhumane living and working conditions, abuse and neglect, crumbling infrastructure, and lack of accountability from leadership have become too common. This legislation is a powerful tool that benefits correctional staff, incarcerated individuals, and

¹ See, e.g., <https://judiciary.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/oversight-bureau-prisons>, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/committee-activity/hearings/09/13/2023/oversight-of-the-federal-bureau-of-prisons>.

² See, e.g., <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-105737>, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105610>, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105302>.

communities. Simply put, an independent oversight agency is key to improving outcomes in the federal prison system.

This bill would also benefit the taxpayer. Equipped with the insights of an oversight body that conducts routine inspections, investigates systemic issues, collects and analyzes data, and reports its findings, Congress – and the House Oversight and Accountability Committee in particular – can make more informed policy and appropriations decisions. These decisions ensure correctional staff can focus on fostering a safe environment behind bars which leads to success when incarcerated individuals return to society. This will in turn improve public safety.

The BOP Director Colette Peters told the House Judiciary Committee last year that she “believe[s] in good government, accountability, transparency, and the importance of oversight.”³ This tailored legislation will provide the accountability, transparency, and oversight that the BOP so desperately needs and wants.

Thank you for your consideration and markup of the *Federal Prison Oversight Act*. I urge the committee to advance this much-needed policy.

Sincerely,

Brett Tolman
Executive Director
Right on Crime

³ https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2023-09-13_-_testimony_-_peters.pdf