



Human Rights Defense Center

DEDICATED TO PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS

October 4, 2019

Nashville LGBT Chamber of Commerce
Board of Directors
41 Peabody Street
Nashville, TN 37210

Re: CoreCivic's Chamber membership

Dear Board members:

On September 13, *Out & About* published an editorial concerning the Nashville LGBT Chamber of Commerce's decision to accept as a member one of the nation's largest for-profit prison companies, CoreCivic (formerly Corrections Corporation of America).

Since then, as a former prisoner who served six years at a CoreCivic-run facility in the 1990s, and as a long-time supporter of the LGBTQ community, I've been waiting to hear more about that issue. Instead there has been a disturbing silence.

To be clear and for full disclosure, I'm opposed to private prisons that incarcerate people for the purpose of generating corporate profit. Having served time at a CoreCivic facility, I have empirical experience; I have also researched and reported on private prisons for the past 20 years, am now a national expert on that topic, and have testified before state legislative committees and members of Congress about the private prison industry.

There is much to criticize about for-profit prisons, from higher rates of violence, more deaths in custody and higher recidivism rates to the fact that private prison firms are primarily in the business of making money – not rehabilitating prisoners, providing a public service or ensuring public safety. Then there is the somewhat idealistic notion that our criminal justice system and the governmental function of incarceration should not be for sale to corporate interests.

Nor does the private prison industry, including CoreCivic, have a stellar track record with respect to the LGBTQ community. For example, a transgender woman testified before Tennessee state lawmakers earlier this year about her treatment at CoreCivic's Trousdale-Turner prison northeast of Nashville, which included assaults, sexual harassment by staff and denial of medical care.

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Last July, transgender immigrant detainees held at a CoreCivic facility in New Mexico reported poor conditions that included inadequate medical care and verbal abuse by staff.

Previously, the ACLU filed a lawsuit on behalf of a transgender woman who was “intimidated, harassed and sexually assaulted” by a CoreCivic guard at a detention facility in Arizona.

And according to a September 25, 2019 press release, “Today, Transgender Law Center (TLC), Black LGBTQIA+ Migrant Project (BLMP), Center for American Progress, along with 11 other LGBTQ, civil rights and immigration justice organizations, submitted a complaint on behalf of current and formerly detained lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals and people living with HIV (LGBTQ, PLWHIV) against CoreCivic, GEO Group, LaSalle Corrections, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), holding them responsible for jeopardizing their health, safety, and lives while in immigration detention.” (GEO Group and LaSalle are other private prison companies.)

Research on prison rape and sexual assault indicates that LGBTQ prisoners are more likely to experience sexual abuse while incarcerated. As an activist investor who owns a small amount of stock in CoreCivic, I introduced a shareholder resolution in 2011 to require the company to issue reports on its efforts to reduce incidents of rape and sexual abuse in its facilities. CoreCivic’s board of directors voted unanimously to *oppose my resolution*, and fought vigorously before the SEC to prevent it from going before shareholders. When that effort failed, the company then successfully urged shareholders to vote against it.

Given this history specific to the LGBTQ community, much of which can be found through a few quick Google searches, it’s odd that the Nashville LGBT Chamber of Commerce would embrace a company like CoreCivic as a member. Then again, as the name suggests, the Chamber is mostly concerned about commerce; i.e., business. And apparently it isn’t very picky about the nature of that business, which in this case is for-profit incarceration that includes a history of mistreatment of LGBTQ prisoners.

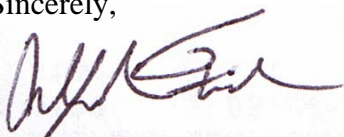
Indeed, some of the incidents described above violate the Nashville Chamber’s Code of Ethics and Business Conduct, specifically, “Instilling a work environment characterized by mutual trust and the absence of intimidation, oppression and exploitation, including, for example, sexual harassment, retaliation, verbal or physical conduct designed to threaten, intimidate or coerce, or other abusive conduct creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.”

What is more likely? That CoreCivic, founded in 1983, has now decided to be a supporter of LGBTQ interests and has joined the Nashville Chamber for that purpose, or that the company is engaged in reputation laundering, whereby it donates to or sponsors non-profits to burnish its tarnished image. My money (no pun intended) is on the latter. And when organizations like the Chamber accept private prison money – which is generated from locking people up, including gay, lesbian and transgender people – they are essentially selling the corporate legitimacy and respectability that CoreCivic is buying, and are consequently complicit in the private prison industry themselves.

The Nashville LGBT Chamber can and should do better, and the LGBTQ community deserves more from organizations that claim to represent their interests. I respectfully ask that you deny CoreCivic membership in the Chamber by revoking their current member status and returning any fees or other funding received from CoreCivic.

Please feel free to contact me should you need any additional information. Thank you for your time and attention in this regard;

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Alex Friedmann', written over a light blue rectangular background.

Alex Friedmann
Associate Director, HRDC
Managing Editor, PLN

cc: Joe Wooley
Lauren Bland