



STORY

Denver Didn't Want The Private Prison Industry To Run Its Halfway Houses. Now Who's Going To Do It?

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BY ALI BUDNER



The Fox Reentry Center, one of the many halfway houses in Denver owned by CoreCivic--at least for now. Image courtesy of Google Maps. United States, undated.

Candi CdeBaca (<https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/denver-city-council/council-members/district-9.html>) was elected to Denver's City Council just last year, and one issue caught her attention right away. It was the fact that two private companies were running most of the city's community corrections facilities, also known as halfway houses. And it hit her personally.

"My brother's actually in prison and has been through the community corrections system," CdeBaca said. "I live across the street from a halfway house that's been there my entire life. My district is the most saturated district with halfway houses."



Candi CdeBaca is the Denver City Councilwoman for District 9. Image courtesy of City of Denver. United States, undated.

The two companies were industry giants GEO Group (<https://www.georeentry.com/>) and CoreCivic (<https://www.corecivic.com/reentry>), and CdeBaca was skeptical that they're motivated to help people like her brother.

"If they're in private prisons, you're making money," she said. "You're making profit while they're in community corrections. You're making profit while they're on your ankle monitors. You're making profit while they're taking your drug tests."

And there was another thing. CdeBaca had also recently been active in protesting the immigration detention center (<https://www.kunc.org/post/everything-we-know-about-what-happens-inside-ice-detention-center-aurora#stream/0>) run by GEO Group in Aurora, just south of Denver. It's a facility that has drawn criticism for operating under alleged (<https://www.denverpost.com/2019/09/18/aclu-report-medical-maltreatment-aurora-immigration-geo-group-ice/>) subpar conditions.

"I was really bothered by the fact that 70 percent of our community corrections beds were in the control of these two companies that we knew were committing egregious harms nationally, in the private prison side and the immigration detention side of the work," she said.

So CdeBaca solicited public comments on the issue. Then, last August, she brought it to a vote, and City Council decided to cut ties (<https://theintercept.com/2019/08/08/private-prisons-contract-denver/>) with both companies.

"The decision kind of to jump out of a plane without a parachute, I think is what I've had the most concern with," said Greg Mauro, who, as director of the Community Corrections Division, oversees (<https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/departments-of-safety/alternative-corrections/community-corrections.html>) halfway house contracts for the city and county of Denver. Dealing with the aftermath fell in his lap. He said the decision affected about 500 residents.

"That was the biggest shock, is what do we do with the people that are in placement and their families and the uncertainty around that," Mauro said.

Some of those 500 residents were released on parole, while others were relocated to other publicly run reentry centers around the state.



Greg Mauro is director of Denver's Community Corrections Division. Image by Ali Budner / 91.5 KRCC. United States, undated.

Mauro said they had to move an entire substance abuse program into a local jail. The city's now considering purchasing one or more of the facilities once owned by the private companies.

Meanwhile, as the city scrambled for a cohesive plan, it temporarily extended (https://www.coloradopolitics.com/news/advisory-group-in-denver-recommends-contract-extension-for-private-prison/article_9a74c292-2283-11ea-94cf-43a41cd3b916.html) the contracts. GEO's has now expired. CoreCivic's will last at least another year.

What people don't realize, according to Mauro, is that Denver's halfway houses have been privately run since the 1970s, but by smaller companies. It wasn't until a few years ago that GEO and CoreCivic took over the majority of the contracts. There was a reason for that.

The state currently reimburses halfway house operators a standard rate of about \$48 per resident per day. Nothing for empty beds. But, according to Mauro, publicly run facilities tend to pay higher staff salaries and must pay overhead to maintain their own buildings.

“If the city continues to go down the road of purchasing properties, those are additional costs that we have to account for,” he said. “It's not just the purchase of the building. It's the ongoing renovations, upkeep, utilities, all those things that could also fall on the city's dime.”

All of that could lead to cities or counties spending more than the state reimbursement.

But Mauro said the switch to GEO and CoreCivic a few years ago did raise questions about performance and incentives, even in his department.

“No one, including myself, is not saying that there isn't tremendous opportunity to improve outcomes,” he said.

Mostly, he was concerned about high staff turnover with the big companies. And he believes the debate over public versus private is a legitimate one.

“You deal with pros and cons either way,” he said.

CoreCivic currently runs 26 halfway houses across the country. GEO Group runs 37. GEO also operates 63 non-residential day reporting centers for people on probation, parole or in the immigration process. Both companies oversee drug and alcohol testing as well as electronic monitoring devices—like ankle bracelets—as part of their services.

Shannon Carst, managing director for all of CoreCivic's halfway houses in Colorado, recently showed me around its Fox Reentry Center

(<https://www.corecivic.com/facilities/fox-facility>) in Denver. It's a two-story

concrete building in an industrial neighborhood near a major highway overpass in the heart of the city.



The Fox Reentry Center is one of CoreCivic's four halfway houses still operating in Denver. Image by Ali Budner / 91.5 KRCC. United States, undated.

“We’ll be walking down the hallway here and seeing some of the group rooms and the therapists’ rooms, and they’ll be in group right now,” Carst said.

It houses about 90 male residents. We peered into several classrooms filled with men around tables deep in conversation. The whole facility is spacious inside, though it felt a bit more like an office building than a home.

Further down the hallway, we pass a new resident who greets Carst personally and tells her he's happy to be here.

Carst has been working for the private sector in Denver's halfway houses for more than two decades. I was curious what she thinks of the criticism from people like Councilwoman Candi CdeBaca, who say that companies like CoreCivic don't have true rehabilitation at the heart of their business model.

"If the bottom line is to be making money," I asked, "then how do you create a structure that incentivizes people to not return? Is that something you can comment on?"

"No, I don't think so," Carst said. "But I think it's insulting to the staff here that have dedicated their lives to this."

So I asked her what she wants people to know. She told me about holiday cards and notes from former residents thanking them for their services. But like her answers to most policy questions, ultimately she said this: "Yeah, I'd have to refer you back to public affairs."

And the response from public affairs was that the company has "made significant commitments (https://www.corecivic.com/hubfs/_files/2018-esgreport.pdf.) to address the recidivism crisis in America."

Colorado's recidivism rate currently hovers around 50%—one of the highest in the nation (<https://vadoc.virginia.gov/media/1363/vadoc-state-recidivism-comparison-report-2018-12.pdf>).

Nothing I could see from my tour of this one halfway house raised red flags about the conditions there. But Denver Councilwoman Candi CdeBaca said that since the city's vote to end the contracts, she's received multiple letters from residents and former employees of halfway houses owned specifically by CoreCivic alleging a toxic work environment, poor sanitary conditions, lack of sufficient food, and forced labor. According to CdeBaca, the letters overwhelmingly praised the city's decision to eventually end its relationship with the companies.

Public affairs for CoreCivic responded saying they were "unaware of allegations of this nature" and that it is the county's job to investigate such issues.

So I asked Greg Mauro, the director of Denver's Community Corrections Division, who said his office does receive and respond to complaints, but he can't comment on any of the detailed allegations in the letters.

For her part, Councilwoman Cdebaca said she's not altogether opposed to private companies running reentry services like halfway houses. It's a matter of scale and accountability to the community.

"Let's get on the record that there is a difference between simply a private entity and a multibillion-dollar corporation," she said.

Either way, Denver is committed to ending its relationship with CoreCivic. Who will fill the gap, and how much it will cost, remains to be seen.



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AUTHOR



ALI BUDNER (<https://pulitzercenter.org/people/ali-budner>)

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Ali Budner is 91.5 KRCC's reporter for the Mountain West News Bureau, a journalism collaborative that unites six stations across the Mountain West, including stations in Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming,...

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