

April 20, 2021

Secretary Marty Walsh
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Ave, N.W. RM S2018
Washington, D.C. 20210

Attorney General Merrick Garland
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20530

Re: Anamosa State Penitentiary Correctional Staff Deaths

Dear Secretary Walsh & Attorney General Garland:

On March 23, 2021, two inmates attempted to escape the Anamosa State Penitentiary in Anamosa, Iowa. They violently attacked and killed a nurse and correctional officer with hammers. These inmates also held another staff member hostage and seriously injured a fellow inmate who attempted to render aid. This is the first time an Iowa prisoner has killed a worker since 1972. This terrible tragedy should never have happened, and we believe, unfortunately, this incident was completely preventable.

For the last several years, the Reynolds Administration and Iowa Department of Corrections (DOC) have disregarded and dismissed several warning signs. Currently, Iowa's prison system is 10% over capacity while 9% of staff positions are vacant. Since 2009, staff levels have dropped by 17% - 600 positions - throughout the state's correctional facilities. Since 2019, offender assaults on staff have also increased.

Over the last several years, the Governor and Iowa Legislature have cut \$10 million from the DOC budget, making it difficult to maintain balanced staff-inmate ratios. In 2017, they also stripped away the rights of correctional staff to bargain for a safe work environment.

Last year, the Iowa Occupational Safety and Health Administration (I-OSHA) issued numerous warnings and serious violations to DOC for inadequate communication and prison staffing. One I-OSHA report warned Anamosa employees did not have reliable communication equipment or adequate staff for emergency responses. The deadly attack in Anamosa occurred eight months after the warnings and \$20,000 in fines for safety violations.

In addition to the conditions that led to the attack in Anamosa, other DOC facilities are facing similar challenges. During February 2020, an IMCC officer was struck by an offender 15 times before anyone could intervene. The Iowa Medical and Classification Center (IMCC) was fined \$9,472 for lacking reliable emergency communication equipment needed during this violent attack. This report also cited that low staffing levels and overcrowded prisons lead to increased staff assaults. As of date, neither the DOC nor the Governor have taken corrective action.

Instead of heeding warnings and working to improve safety in our correctional facilities, the DOC began denying state inspectors access to facilities for fair and independent safety

assessments. In December, the DOC even proposed legislation to prohibit I-OSHA from investigating prisons after an attack to avoid paying additional fines for safety violations.

To date, the Governor and DOC have failed to address gross understaffing, overcapacity facilities, hazardous prison conditions, and other warning signs. These factors ultimately led to the tragic deaths of two Iowans who dedicated their lives trying to keep the public safe.

Based on the persistent safety violations and deadly attack in Anamosa, we are requesting the US Department of Labor or US Department of Justice independently investigate the two deaths in Anamosa on March 23, 2021 and the safety of Iowa's correctional facilities to help prevent further violence and loss of life.

We stand ready to assist you with anything needed to strengthen Iowa's public safety and ensure Iowa workers return safely home to their families every night.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



U.S. Rep. Cindy Axne



Iowa Senate Minority Leader Zach Wahls



Iowa House Minority Leader Todd Prichard