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Grassley, Durbin Statement Following Phone Call with Attorney General Regarding Federal Prison System Efforts to Combat COVID-19

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[For Immediate Release](#)

Wednesday, May 6, 2020

[Grassley, Durbin Statement Following Phone Call with Attorney General Regarding Federal Prison System Efforts to Combat COVID-19](#)

WASHINGTON – Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) and Senate Democratic Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) yesterday afternoon spoke via phone with Attorney General William Barr regarding the Justice Department's and Bureau of Prison's (BOP) efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the federal prison system. The senators issued the following statement about that call.

"We appreciate the Attorney General updating us about precautions the department is taking in response to the pandemic, including the use of authorities granted under our bipartisan criminal justice reform law. We asked about issues of testing, patient transfers and quarantine within prisons, including our concern that inmates have been transferred to the federal prison in Thomson, Illinois, without being tested for COVID-19. The Attorney General also committed to us that he would look into a whistleblower complaint regarding the conditions at the Federal Medical Center, Carswell, where Andrea Circle Bear died, as well as reports that the BOP refused an offer from the Centers for Disease Control to set up a portable site to test staff and inmates at the Federal Correctional Institution, Forrest City. Attorney General Barr also indicated his interest in making more frequent use of home confinement to combat the health crisis, which is positive news and a position we've advocated.

"The federal government has a moral responsibility to ensure the health and safety of BOP staff and prisoners in its custody. We were encouraged to hear the Attorney General say that the COVID-19 pandemic will now be used as a basis for compassionate release and that it's possible for some low-risk inmates being released to serve a 14-day quarantine in home confinement instead of in prison, depending on the circumstances. It's critical that the Justice Department and Bureau of Prisons press forward on these efforts and be more transparent in the process."

Grassley and Durbin were lead authors of the landmark *First Step Act*, which became law in 2018. The senators have [urged](#) the use of home confinement authorities granted under the *First Step Act* to protect vulnerable inmates and [asked](#) the inspector general to review the Bureau of Prison's implementation of those authorities in light of the public health crisis.

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