



Human Rights Defense Center

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Private Prison Strategies: Contracts/Site Fights

Contracts to operate correctional facilities are the life blood of private prison companies. While opposing the siting of private prisons in local communities (site fights) is difficult, it is certainly not impossible.

Residents in a South Florida community near a proposed 1,500-bed CCA-operated immigration detention center waged a successful yearlong opposition campaign that culminated in the cancellation of the project in June 2012.

The proposed CCA facility, the Southwest Ranches Detention Center, would have been almost three times the size of the Krome Detention Center in Miami, making it the largest such facility in South Florida. CCA said the \$75 million prison would create 300 “stable, well-paying local jobs and careers,” and would be “community friendly.”

Residents in Pembroke Pines, however, didn’t buy the company’s PR pitch. “We are concerned about an increase in crime, and increases in traffic,” said Ryann Greenberg, a member of Residents Against SW Ranches ICE Detention Center, who noted the facility would be located near residential areas and several schools.

Greenberg and other citizens opposed to the CCA facility formed a Facebook page, staged public protests, put up “no prison” signs, distributed flyers, filed public records requests, circulated a petition and packed city hall to express their concerns.

The city commissioners for Pembroke Pines voted to withdraw from their agreement with a neighboring town to provide water, sewer, fire and emergency medical services to the proposed CCA facility, and shortly afterward ICE announced it no longer needed a detention center in the area, effectively killing the project. CCA later sued Pembroke Pines but eventually lost.

Similarly, in 2012, citizens in the town of Crete, Illinois successfully opposed a CCA detention facility, convincing the Board of Trustees to vote against it. The site fight victory occurred after more than a year of protests by local activists.

Several national organizations support local site fights against private prisons, including the Private Corrections Institute and Grassroots Leadership. For example, Grassroots Leadership and HRDC are currently involved in opposing a contract in Dallas, Texas that would allow CCA to assume a lease agreement to build and operate a reentry/halfway house facility.

Please reply to Tennessee office:
5331 Mt. View Road #130, Antioch, TN 37013
Phone: 615.495.6568 • Fax: 866.735.7136
afriedmann@prisonlegalnews.org
www.humanrightsdefensecenter.org

The benefits of site fights should not be underestimated; they can serve as a public education platform to inform both local residents and policymakers about private prison issues; they can expose questionable dealings by private prison companies and local lawmakers (for example, violations of open meetings laws or conflicts of interest); and they force private prison firms to respond publicly to opposition and face negative media coverage.

Local opposition is also useful with respect to existing private prison contracts. For example, following opposition by organizations in Ohio, including the ACLU, the federal Bureau of Prisons decided in 2014 not to renew a contract with CCA to house prisoners at the company's Northeast Ohio Correctional Center in Youngstown (although, unfortunately, the BOP instead contracted with CCA competitor GEO Group).

Presently, CCA receives about 14% of its gross revenue from the State of California, primarily through contracts to house California prisoners in out-of-state facilities. In October 2015, CCA announced the renewal of a three-year contract with California to continue housing up to 6,562 prisoners out-of-state – which is down from a high of over 10,000 prisoners just a few years ago. California is thus a prime target for opposition to existing contracts with CCA.

Organized labor groups can support site fights by providing “boots on the ground” from union locals, as well as funding, promotional materials such as signs and brochures, and direct contact with local lawmakers and policymakers to oppose private prison sitings. Some communities welcome private prisons due to the jobs and financial benefits they promise, while others are strongly opposed to becoming “private prison towns.”

Of course, support and lobbying against private prison contracts on the state legislative level can also have a material impact on the private prison industry – such as when a bill to privatize one-fourth of Florida's prison system was narrowly defeated in 2012 by one vote in the state senate following a hard-fought opposition campaign by HRDC and other advocacy groups as well as the Teamsters, which represents Florida state correctional officers.