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DOJ OIG Releases Capstone Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Department of Justice (DOJ) Inspector General Michael E. Horowitz announced today the release of a capstone review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This capstone review summarizes the Office of the Inspector General's (OIG) overall findings regarding the BOP's response to the pandemic, including issues we identified from our 2020 remote inspections of 16 facilities housing BOP inmates and other OIG pandemic oversight of the BOP. The report also identifies challenges that the BOP will likely continue to face during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as actions that the BOP should undertake to prepare for future public health emergencies.

The OIG's findings include the following:

- **The BOP Should Improve and Retain Effective Practices for Protecting Staff and Inmate Health and Safety During Public Health Emergencies.** First, we identified serious failures in the BOP's use of single-celling of inmates during COVID-19 modified operations; the BOP reported to the OIG that seven inmates died by suicide from March 2020 through April 2021 while housed in single-cell confinement in quarantine units related to COVID-19. We found that the BOP should review its policies and processes on placing inmates in single cells. Second, we found that the BOP should explore permanent facility modifications to help it more easily implement future infection control measures.
 - **The BOP Should Assess How It Can More Effectively Utilize Its Home Confinement Authorities.** We found that, while the BOP transferred a substantial number of inmates from prisons to home confinement during the first few months of the pandemic, the BOP actually transferred fewer inmates during the first year of the pandemic than it had during the year immediately preceding the pandemic. Due to the decreasing inmate population overall, the percentage of inmates transferred to home confinement was similar for both years.
 - **The BOP Should Take Appropriate Steps to Address Staffing Shortages and Staff Morale.** The pandemic exacerbated the effects of preexisting BOP staffing shortages and strained staff morale, and we concluded that the BOP should improve how it communicates available staff support resources.
 - **The BOP Should Improve Its Communication of Essential Information to Stakeholders.** We identified a significant deficiency in the BOP's communication with inmates' families regarding COVID-19 related serious illnesses. We also found that the BOP did not always timely notify crime victims when inmates were released to the public or transferred to home confinement or a Residential Reentry Center.
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- **The BOP Should Provide Clear Guidance on the Use of Healthcare Protective Equipment and Compliance with Healthcare Safety Guidance.** We found that the BOP should provide clear guidance on staff and inmate use of healthcare protective equipment and compliance with healthcare safety guidance.
- **The BOP Should Respond to Ongoing Pandemic Challenges and Prepare for Future Public Health Emergencies.** We found that the BOP should continue to explore ways to safely accommodate inmate access to mental healthcare, programming, legal counsel, recreation, commissary, and communication options during extended modified pandemic operations and continue its COVID-19 vaccine educational campaigns for inmates. Finally, to prepare for future public health emergencies, the BOP should document best practices and lessons learned from its ongoing COVID-19 challenges.

The report makes 10 recommendations to assist the BOP in managing challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and in mitigating the effects of public health emergencies in the future. The BOP generally agreed with all of the recommendations.

Report: Today's report is available on the OIG's website at the following link:

<https://oig.justice.gov/reports/capstone-review-federal-bureau-prisons-response-coronavirus-disease-2019-pandemic>

Video: To accompany today's report, the OIG has released a 3-minute video of the Inspector General discussing the report's findings. The video and a downloadable transcript are available at the following link:

<https://youtu.be/g1P-LhznRGk>

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