

## **PRESS RELEASE**



Private Corrections Institute (www.privateci.org)

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### **Proponents of Privatizing Florida Prisons Have Undisclosed Connections with Private Prison Company**

*The Florida Chamber of Commerce and South Florida Prison Ministries, in favor of prison privatization, have connections with private prison firm GEO Group they failed to disclose. Private Corrections Institute decries process: “This is not what Democracy looks like.”*

Tallahassee, FL – The Florida Senate is currently considering SB2038, a bill that would privatize around 27 state correctional facilities and cost approximately 3,800 state workers their jobs, in an effort to save an estimated \$16.5 million – [less than 1%](#) of Florida’s corrections budget.

On February 8, Claudio Perez, the CEO of South Florida Jail Ministries, in an op-ed and a letter delivered to the Florida Senate, expressed his support for the privatization plan. Perez claimed that faith-based rehabilitative programs “would have a greater opportunity to flourish in privately run state prisons,” and cited cost savings and competition as reasons to pass SB2038. A number of other faith organizations have [voiced their opposition](#) to prison privatization.

On February 13, the Florida Chamber of Commerce issued a press release through Ron Sachs Communications, a public relations firm. The Chamber’s press release stated that “data shows privately run prisons can provide a better environment for effective inmate rehabilitation programs.” The press release failed to mention that two studies, [one in Florida](#) and [one in Oklahoma](#), found that inmates released from private prisons were no better rehabilitated than those released from public prisons, based on recidivism rates.

More importantly, neither South Florida Jail Ministries nor the Florida Chamber of Commerce disclosed their connections to Boca Raton-based GEO Group, the nation’s second largest private prison company which stands to benefit financially should SB2038 pass.

South Florida Jail Ministries is part of the [AGAPE Network](#), of which Claudio Perez is president and CEO, and AGAPE is a member of [Health Choice Network](#). One of the Florida lobbyists for Health Choice Network is [Ron L. Book](#). Who else does Book currently lobby for? GEO Group. Also, Book was employed as a lobbyist for [South Florida Jail Ministries](#) in 2003, according to records maintained by the Florida legislature. Thus, the same lobbyist that formerly represented South Florida Jail Ministries, and currently lobbies for the partner organization of another of Perez’s groups, is a paid lobbyist for GEO Group.

Perez, in his letter to Florida Senators and his op-ed in support of prison privatization, failed to mention this connection with one of the private prison firms that would benefit from SB2038.

As for the Florida Chamber of Commerce, GEO Group has been [a member](#) of the Chamber of Commerce for at least 8 years. According to the website for the GEO Group Foundation, which supports “the community and charitable involvement of employees and facilities of The GEO Group,” the Foundation has [donated](#) “\$16,310 to local chamber of commerce.”

“Certainly, most advocacy groups have an agenda. For example, the Private Corrections Institute opposes prison privatization on a number of public policy grounds,” stated PCI president Alex Friedmann, a former prisoner who served time at a private prison in the 1990s. “But we do not try to conceal our agenda, unlike many supporters of prison privatization.”

Friedmann further noted that some of the sources mentioned by the Senate Rules Committee in support of cost savings through prison privatization had undisclosed biases. For example, the Committee cited research by the Reason Foundation, but failed to note that Reason receives funding from private prison companies, including GEO Group and CCA. Reason’s [2009 donor list](#) included GEO as a Platinum Level supporter while CCA was a Gold Level donor.

“The Reason Foundation routinely fails to mention in its private prison research that it receives funding from private prison companies, which casts doubt on the objectivity of such research and on the propriety of relying on that research in support of SB2038” said Friedmann.

PCI also criticized the process being used to push the private prison bill. The prison privatization plan was originally introduced last year as part of the state’s appropriations bill – a backdoor approach that a state court [found unconstitutional](#). The Legislature has appealed that decision. SB2038 was introduced in January as a committee bill after the deadline for individual bills had passed, and was placed on a fast track by the Senate leadership. Public debate on the bill was curtailed and Senate President Mike Haridopolos removed Senator Mike Fasano as chairman of an appropriations subcommittee due to his opposition to SB2038.

“The Senate leadership needs to realize that the State of Florida is not the former Soviet Union and the Florida Senate is not the Politburo,” said Friedmann. “Those Senators who support the prison privatization bill are also condoning the questionable process being used to advance this legislation. This is not what Democracy looks like, irrespective of party.”

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The Private Corrections Institute is a non-profit citizen watchdog organization that works to educate the public about the significant dangers and pitfalls associated with the privatization of correctional services. PCI maintains an online collection of news reports and other resources related to the private prison industry, and holds the position that for-profit prisons have no place in a free and democratic society.