"It's like they don't believe in COVID-19": Complaint claims ICE failing to contain infections at Aurora facility Poor health standards resulted in a coronavirus outbreak inside the immigration detention facility run by the private, for-profit GEO Group, advocacy group says.

A national immigrant advocacy group has filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security over a COVID outbreak at the immigration detention facility in Aurora. The complaint, filed by the American Immigration Council, alleges that Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s official tally of active COVID cases within the facility - which hit 138 on Feb. 7 - is an undercount because the facility is not conducting adequate testing. There were 68 active cases within the facility on Feb. 15, the most recent official account reported by the Vera Institute of Justice. The facility has an average daily population of about 550. According to the complaint, the facility has not provided sufficient opportunities for vaccination, is not enforcing mask rules for staff, is not providing enough cleaning supplies and is neglecting the medical needs of those who are detained. Detainees who want to speak out against the issues fear reprisal, the complaint states. The complaint asks for improved conditions within the facility and for more detainees to be released from custody while their immigration cases are pending. "People should be able to pursue their claims to immigration relief without putting their physical and mental health at risk," the complaint states. The Aurora facility, which is owned by the private, for-profit prison company GEO Group, has been at the center of controversy before for its handling of the pandemic during previous waves of infection. The complaint, which was filed in partnership with the locally based Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network, alleges that little has changed. RMIAN provides free attorneys and legal services to adults and children in immigration detention in Colorado, including those at the Aurora facility. "Access to medical care is a human right," Colleen Cowgill, a RMIAN pro bono coordinating attorney, said in a statement. "ICE cannot continue to detain people while failing to provide for their health and safety. We are two years into the pandemic and ICE has shown that it cannot protect those in its care." In a statement to The Colorado Sun, ICE said the agency follows U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance in its facilities and has vaccinated nearly 50,000 of its detainees nationwide. The agency says it has translated vaccine informational materials into multiple languages for its detainees and provides appropriate medical care for detainees who do fall sick. As of late January, the agency had given monoclonal antibody or antiviral treatments to 89 detainees nationwide with COVID. "ICE is focused on delivering high-quality, evidence-based medical care and will continue to ensure detained individuals receive care with dignity and respect," the statement read. Affidavits filed by detainees included in the complaint state that medical isolation cells at the Aurora facility for detainees who contract COVID are dirty and testing is minimal. One detainee, identified in the complaint by the pseudonym Leticia, said she was left in the general population for several days even after her roommate tested positive for COVID and she felt sick herself. "Although people are often sick, I only see people getting tested for COVID-19 when they are getting ready to fly to be deported," she said in her affidavit. When she finally received a test - which came back positive - Leticia said she was moved to a "suicide watch room," where she was initially denied a television and also was not provided with craft supplies she had requested to pass the time. "There was a really bad smell in the suicide room because of an issue with the sewer pipes in the room," Leticia said in her affidavit. "Medical staff told me they had put in service orders, but nothing had been done." Detainees also allege that guards seldom provide masks to detainees or wear them properly themselves, despite rules requiring them to do both. "If I asked an officer to get me a mask, they would not because they do not have them or they don't want to," one detainee, identified in the complaint by the pseudonym Musa, stated in an affidavit. "It's like they do not care. It's like they don't believe in COVID-19." Staffers for U.S. Rep. Jason Crow, an Aurora Democrat whose district includes the Aurora facility, have been conducting weekly monitoring of the facility since early in the pandemic. His office’s most recent report, dated Feb. 9, found that 140 of the 497 people housed at the facility on that date - 28% - were being "cohort" due to sickness. The term refers to the practice of isolating groups of people in order to contain the spread of the virus. The report also stated that 910 people housed at the facility have tested positive for COVID since March 30, 2020 - a number that includes both ICE detainees and people held there by the U.S. Marshals Service. There have been 218 positive cases among ICE and GEO Group employees working at the facility. The complaint echoes concerns he has long raised about the Aurora detention facility, Crow said in a statement. "The allegations outlined in this report are serious and highlight the ongoing need for oversight of these private, for-profit facilities," Crow said. "I remain committed to holding this facility accountable and increasing transparency."