

STATE NEWS

State officials demand transparency as businesses get billions in Trump tariff refunds

BY KEVIN HARDY
Kansas Reflector



Shipping cranes stand above container ships loaded with shipping containers at the Port of Los Angeles on Feb. 20, 2026, in Los Angeles, Calif. The fiscal leaders of several states are demanding transparency and consumer fairness as President Donald Trump's administration seeks to refund billions in international tariffs. (Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images)

The fiscal leaders of several states are demanding transparency and consumer fairness as President Donald Trump's administration seeks to refund billions in international tariffs following a recent Supreme Court loss.

In a February decision, the high court dealt a blow to the president's trade agenda, ruling by a 6-3 margin that the tariffs he issued under the International Economic Emergency Powers Act were illegal.

Last month, U.S. Customs and Border Protection began accepting applications from importers and brokers who are owed an estimated \$166 billion in import tax refunds. While companies are receiving those refunds, it appears that many don't intend to share those funds with consumers, who paid for much of the tariffs through higher prices.

"We're the ones who paid it. We're the ones that need to get it back, and so any system that doesn't get it to the little guy doesn't get it to the right place," Minnesota State Auditor Julie Blaha said on a press call Wednesday.

She was among eight Democratic state fiscal leaders who urged the White House to publicly disclose which firms are receiving tariff refunds and to ensure consumers are not left out.

Blaha said government agencies are well equipped for that task, noting the public websites set up during the coronavirus pandemic that disclosed which companies received pandemic grants and loans. There is currently no public database of tariff refund requests or agency determinations.

"We're not asking the federal government to do anything they don't ask of states and local entities or nonprofits to do when they are using some of their funds," she said. "We know how to do this kind of over-

sight." Blaha said transparency is particularly important since the White House is opposed to repaying the tariffs in the first place. The president has said his administration would "fight" the refund effort, though reports indicate more than \$35 billion has already been sent to companies.

Illinois State Treasurer Mike Frerichs said American consumers are suffering from high prices as the president and his inner circle enrich themselves.

"No one trusts the federal government anymore," he said. "They feel like the deck is stacked against them, and this example just adds further proof to their beliefs."

State leaders estimated the tariffs cost Illinois consumers nearly \$9 billion. But the current process does not ensure that those funds will be returned to consumers.

"Trump's system is opaque by de-

sign, with no guarantee of the \$9 billion owed to Illinois families and businesses returning home," Frerichs said Wednesday. "...Millions of Americans and businesses deserve every penny back."

The president blasted conservative Supreme Court justices who nixed his tariffs, saying their decision earlier this year was a "disgrace to our nation" as well as "unpatriotic and disloyal to our Constitution."

He has remained committed to tariffs on foreign imports, believing that they will incentivize manufacturers to build products in the United States rather than overseas.

After the Supreme Court loss, Trump ordered a 10% global tariff, which has also been challenged in court. Last week, the U.S. Court of International Trade granted a permanent injunction to a Florida-based toy manufacturer and a New York-based spice importer that sued the Trump administration over those tariffs.

Kansas Department of Corrections signs inmate healthcare contract starting at \$88.9M annually

■ Topeka-based VitalCore's track record serving Mississippi prisons raises red flag

BY TIM CARPENTER
Kansas Reflector

The Kansas Department of Corrections signed a two-year contract with a private healthcare company based in Topeka to provide medical services for 10,000 inmates at the state's eight adult prisons and the Kansas Juvenile Correctional Complex.

The deal with VitalCore Health Strategies would obligate the state to pay \$88.9 million in the initial fiscal year starting July 1, state Department of Corrections officials said. The contract could be lengthened twice under separate two-year extensions. The annual cost escalator would be 3.5% for the life of the contract — an increase of \$3 million in the second year of the deal. The pact would run through June 30, 2032, if the maximum of six years were authorized.

"I am confident that VitalCore will serve our residents and the agency well, providing medical care that addresses the needs of the incarcerated population," said Jeff Zmuda, secretary of the Department of Corrections. "I look forward to a strong, mutually beneficial relationship."

Under the contract, VitalCore

would be responsible for all costs associated with onsite medical services, offsite hospital care, outpatient surgery, ambulatory services, dental, medical personnel, behavioral health, hepatitis C treatment and the electronic health records system. Medical services would be provided 24 hours a day, 365 days each year by a staff of 500 full-time equivalent employees.

News reports regarding VitalCore's work in Mississippi prisons raised concern about the quality of care provided by the company. Mississippi Today's series "Behind Bars, Beyond Care" reported that VitalCore denied medication to inmates with hepatitis C and HIV, an untreated broken arm resulted in an amputation, and a delayed cancer screening led to a terminal diagnosis. There was evidence medical staff in Mississippi prisons labeled inmates as "noncompliant" so they could be sent back to cells without treatment.

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The Kansas Department of Corrections said the decision to hire VitalCore was the result of a competitive process that attracted six other companies to the bidding.

"Healthcare services for our population is an essential part of operations in our correctional facilities," Zmuda said. "This contract allows us to fulfill our obligations to provide healthcare

services that meet the needs of our incarcerated population."

The contract with VitalCore was separate from a \$2.3 million arrangement with the University of Kansas Medical Center to provide oversight and monitoring of contractors.

Health challenges of about 9,800 Kansas adult inmates in the Lansing, Hutchinson, El Dorado, Topeka, Ellsworth, Norton, Winfield and Larned facilities were complex given the incidence of mental health issues, chronic hypertension and respiratory conditions as well as cases of hepatitis C and HIV. The state's juvenile facility in Topeka serves approximately 200 inmates.

In March, Zmuda said the current prison medical care contract was held by Centurion of Kansas, which provided services to state inmates since July 2020. The state contract was put out for bid during November in anticipation of selecting a vendor in 2026.

The Department of Correction's request for proposals from healthcare companies said residents of KDOC facilities should "receive appropriate and necessary health care in the least restrictive environment while conserving resources and costs."

VitalCore was founded in 2015 and maintains a headquarters in Topeka. It operates nationwide by serving approximately 80,000 individuals in more than 100 correctional facilities in the United States.



Jeff Zmuda, secretary of the Kansas Department of Corrections, says the agency signed a minimum two-year contract with VitalCore Health Strategies of Topeka to provide healthcare to about 10,000 adult and juvenile inmates at nine prisons across the state. The contract can be renewed for a maximum of four years. (Photo by Tim Carpenter/Kansas Reflector)

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