

NEWS &gt; POLITICS

# Florida's disaster pipeline funnels millions to politically connected contractors



President Donald Trump is greeted by Gov. Ron DeSantis, R-Fla., as he arrives at "Alligator Alcatraz," a new migrant detention facility at Dade-Collier Training and Transition facility, Tuesday, July 1, 2025, in Ochopee, Fla. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)



By **JEFFREY SCHWEERS** | [jschweers@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:jschweers@orlandosentinel.com) | Orlando Sentinel

UPDATED: July 20, 2025 at 4:52 AM EDT

In a matter of days, a detention camp for undocumented migrants state officials have dubbed “Alligator Alcatraz” rose out of the mosquito-infested Florida Everglades [in time for a visit from President Trump on July 1.](#)

The rapid mobilization of workers and materials was made possible by Florida emergency rules that allow Gov. Ron DeSantis to suspend state laws, building codes and the public, competitive bidding process to award millions of dollars from an account he alone controls.

The governor has used this same disaster pipeline for years to funnel billions of dollars to contractors with political ties to himself and the GOP. Some of those contractors won jobs again when his administration moved quickly this summer to build a detention center in the Everglades.

“It’s not Alligator Alcatraz. It’s Gator Grift,” said state Rep. Fentrice Driskell of Tampa, leader of the Democrat minority in the House.

The state’s emergency rules gave DeSantis the power to commandeer an airport owned by Miami-Dade County and deploy more than a dozen contractors to erect a tent city that has so far cost taxpayers about \$240 million, according to available public records.

State officials said it will cost \$450 million a year to operate what is supposed to be a temporary detention facility for up to 3,000 people.

Florida law allows the governor to declare a 60-day emergency, and he has done that after hurricanes, tornadoes and floods and then awarded contracts to companies on a pre-approved vendor list — to repair roads and bridges, clean up debris, and provide food, medical care and temporary shelter to victims.

DeSantis also has the power to renew those orders every 60 days as long as he deems an emergency exists. And since 2023 he has stretched the meaning of an emergency to include rounding up immigrants and sending them to Martha's Vineyard and California, deploying Florida National Guard troops and state law enforcement officers to the Texas-Mexico border, intercepting people trying to get into Florida by boat, and evacuating Florida residents from Haiti and Israel.

"If you ask the every-day Floridian what is an emergency, they would say a hurricane or flooding, not immigration," Driskell said.

The authority to build the new detention center comes from an executive order DeSantis signed in January 2023 declaring an immigration emergency and renewed 15 times since. Under state law, the auditor general is supposed to review all expenditures issued under an emergency order that is more than a year old, [but to date no such audit has been conducted.](#)

CDR Health, a longtime state contractor, won a \$17.5 million contract to provide medical facilities at the camp. It has contributed nearly \$4 million to Republican candidates over the years, and gave \$500,000 to a political committee associated with DeSantis in March.



IRG Global, a spinoff of ARS Global, which has provided millions in hurricane recovery services over the last four years, got three contracts totaling \$6.6 million including for shuttle operations, airfield ground control transportation and a flight control manager.

It also received a \$19 million contract to evacuate Americans from Israel.

IRG donated \$3,000 to Attorney General James Uthmeier's political campaign and \$10,000 to the Republican Party of Florida around the same time it got its contracts. IRG, ARS Global and its officers have contributed nearly \$400,000 to DeSantis and the GOP.

The biggest contract for Alligator Alcatraz is \$78.5 million to Critical Response Strategies for staffing, including \$260,000 for a warden, \$160,000 for a camp manager and \$8.7 million for an unspecified number of corrections officers. Those positions were advertised on Indeed.com.

CRS has previously done around \$70 million in business with the state, mostly for medical staffing. Will Adkins, a manager of CRS, donated \$240 to DeSantis in 2021 and 2022.

None of the businesses hired to build, staff and run the detention center appear to have any prior experience operating corrections facilities.

DeSantis and his administration have touted the quickly built detention center as a model for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to use in other states as it works to fulfill the president's orders to deport thousands of undocumented immigrations.

"Within a week we had this facility set up," DeSantis said. "Florida set the standard for doing this swiftly, defying expectations of what the government can do."

It's hard to understand the full scope of the work on the 39-acre site that was a former airport strip because of inaccuracies on a public contract database.

One contract in the database, for example, said \$36.8 million was awarded to Loving Touch Services — a defunct hair salon in Boynton Beach. It was

---

The reporter also pointed out other irregularities. For instance, the Longview contract includes a line item of \$5.95 million for Lemoine CDR, an affiliate of CDR Health. One of two contracts originally listed for CDR Health also included a \$21.1 million line item for Gothams, a technology company that gave \$50,000 to a political action committee associated with DeSantis.

The Division of Emergency Management did not answer questions about those inaccuracies but removed more than a dozen contracts from the public site.



Aerial view of structures, including gigantic tents built at the recently opened migrant detention center Alligator Alcatraz, located at the site of the Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport in Ochopee, Florida, on July 4, 2025. (Pedro Portal/Miami Herald/TNS)

The lack of transparency and the bypass of competitive bidding makes it difficult to know if citizens are getting the most bang for their buck, said Jeff Brandes, a St. Petersburg area Republican and former state senator who started his own think tank after leaving the senate in 2022.

"I have no doubt that we are not getting the best price," said Brandes, who has made a reputation for himself as an expert on prison reform. "This facility will cost eight to 10 times what it costs to have a typical inmate in a Florida prison."

DeSantis and his allies have defended the project, saying the federal

The most recent accounts said there were about 750 detainees at the Everglades camp, which will eventually be able to house up to 4,000 people. DHS has started moving in “a significant number of people, and starting to deport people too,” DeSantis said Thursday in Jacksonville.

The Everglades camp is designed to be a way station for detainees, a “quick processing center, with a runway right there to send people back to their home country.”

DeSantis said his goal is to fill the Everglades facility before starting work on a second detention center at Camp Blanding, a military base southwest of Jacksonville that’s used as a training camp for the Florida National Guard and once housed 4,000 German POWs after WWII.

In contrast to the no-bid contracts issued for the Everglades camp, DeSantis said the state requested proposals for the Camp Blanding one. “I believe there are a number of bids from people.”

He did not explain why the Camp Blanding project would be done differently.

Most of the money for Alligator Alcatraz comes from a \$500 million emergency fund first approved by the Legislature in 2022. The money was agreed to despite misgivings from several Democrats and some Republicans about the lack of specificity about its purpose and a lack of fiscal oversight.

And when Sen. Jason Pizzo, a former Democrat, asked if immigration initiatives would fall under that fund, bill sponsor Sen. Danny Burgess, a Republican from Tampa Bay, gave a noncommittal response. “I am not going to speculate about the myriad of disasters that are out there,” Burgess said.

The Legislature has continued to give DeSantis his \$500 million a year emergency fund, in addition to hundreds of millions more when he’s run through that allotment. He also has a \$14.6 billion rainy day fund to tap into for emergencies.

In the past, contractors with political ties also got state work, with ARS

---

"We watched as Republicans gave DeSantis whatever he wanted ... as he built a national profile as he prepared to run for President," Driskell said. "Now we see the governor use this slush fund with no oversight to pay for these political stunts."

With the money spent to build the Everglades detention center, the state could end its teacher shortage, pay for storm-water improvements, fix the property insurance crisis or solve housing affordability, she added.

"We were told to wait when it comes to those issues, but the governor is able to spring to action and get this done," she said.

*Originally Published: July 19, 2025 at 10:54 AM EDT*

**2025 > July > 19**