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Etowah Visitation Project to resume detainee visits at county jail



Activists gathered outside the Etowah County Detention Center Saturday, June 20, 2015 for "Chant Down the Walls," a celebration of music for immigrant detainees. (William Thornton / wthornton@al.com)

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A group which visits immigration detainees at the Etowah County Detention Center has been notified it is being allowed access to them after a ban of about a month.

Etowah County Sheriff Todd Entrekin notified members of the Etowah Visitation Project that they will be granted access to the jail again for regular monthly visits.

Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Natalie Barton said the group is being given "a second chance to visit immigration detainees inside the Detention Center. Their status is as visitors only and must follow visitation rules. Should these rules be ignored or violated again, they will not be allowed to visit."

There are about 270 immigration detainees in the jail. The jail holds about 700 inmates in total. The visitation project has staged visits once or twice a month. In August, [members of the project and Adalante Alabama Worker Center staged a protest](#) on the ban.

Members of the project believed the ban came after Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC), an immigration visitation group, filed a complaint against the detention center, alleging inadequate medical care, assaults and harassment. That complaint followed [a protest at the jail on June 20.](#)

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In August, the sheriff ended ties with the group for misconduct that "affected the order and operation of programs inside the Detention Center," Barton said. However, immediately after, members of the group were still able to conduct individual visits with detainees.

Last week, Entrekin notified the group they could resume their visits. According to a letter to the Southern Poverty Law Center, Entrekin said members of the visitation project have encouraged detainees not to take part in programs offered there. He also said members of the project have subjected jail employees to verbal abuse and threats.

"I also understand that while there are many who see confinement of this population as inappropriate and/or unnecessary," Entrekin wrote, "we are in the detention business. This is a philosophical divide that we will most likely never be able to cross."

In a reply, Eunice Cho, an attorney with the SPLC, stated it did not agree that project workers verbally abused jail workers or encouraged detainees not to participate in educational programs. Cho also said the SPLC awaits a clarification from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on whether visitors can be denied access "in retaliation for expression protected by the First Amendment."


Cho said the incident illustrates that "immigrant detention is creating a tangle of legal issues for detainees and government officials."

Katherine Weathers, coordinator of the Etowah Visitation Project, said the group is "very appreciative" that visits can resume.

"We're really happy," she said. "We never really understood the reason why our agreement ended. We hope going forward we can work with the sheriff and his staff in a productive manner."



Weathers said the project is planning another visit next week.

This post was corrected at 6:14 p.m. Sept. 30 to correct an attribution.


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