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Event honors immigration detainees

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Organizers of an event held Saturday at the Etowah County Detention Center emphasized it was not a protest but a chance to bring some music to immigration detainees on Father's Day weekend.

"We just wanted to bring some music to the detention center," Yazmin Contreras, an organizer of the event said.

She represents Adelante Alabama Worker Center.

Lisa Moyer is a volunteer for the event and is from Birmingham and she is involved, she said, because she cares a lot about people's rights and immigration is an issue on the national forefront.

"We want to let the detention detainees know they're not forgotten," Moyer said. "I have some concerns about the detention center."

A crowd began to gather in an designated area in the parking lot at the detention center on Forrest Avenue about 2 p.m. The number of people gathered continued to climb to about 56 through the afternoon.

Near the end of the event, the musicians picked up their instruments and lined up to go up on the steps of the detention center. They asked to go inside and play to the detainees, but were held back by deputies and questioned why they couldn't go inside.

Sheriff Todd Entrekin said they were not allowed inside for safety and security reasons.

Some out front in the parking lot held signs that said "Many nations. One human race. I don't see borders or walls. Do you? Another said "Not one more deportation."

Throughout the event detainees held signs to the windows that said "Thank you" and "Please help us."

The Etowah County Detention Center is one of several in the country that has a contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement to house detainees awaiting deportation.

Etowah County has had a contract with ICE for many years.

The detention center has a capacity of a total of 879. Currently 270 of those are immigration detainees.

The event ended about 6 p.m. according to an agreement with Entrekin and other officials in a preplanning meeting several days ago.



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Omar Leon sings with the band Los Jornaleros Del Norte at an immigration policy demonstration Saturday in the parking lot of the Etowah County Detention Center in Gadsden.

Contreras said the event was not just about the detainees in the Etowah County Detention Center but about concerns about detention centers across the country.

She was born in Washington, but has lived in Clanton just about all her life. Even though many immigrants detained in Etowah County are from all over the world, she has a concern for Latino detainees because of her relatives - many whom live in Mexico.

"It's sad when you're targeted for the way you look," she said.

Contreras and Moyer both say they have never been inside the detention center and based much on what they have heard from detainees and others.

Such as the story by former Etowah County detainee Sylvester Owino, who came to the event and planned to tell his story. He spoke briefly and said conditions were bad but did not elaborate. He is quoted in a news release sent out by Adelante.

He said he spent nine years in immigration detention before being released in March.

"Thanks to the tireless work of grassroots advocates and lawyers and my own ability to not give up hope," Owino said in a news release. "Now I am coming back to Alabama to let other detainees know that they are not alone, and we all must keep fighting. I also want the public to know more about the abuse that go on inside the Etowah County Detention Center and the way those of us caught up in the immigration detention system are treated as less than human."

But it is stories such as Owino that do not reflect an accurate picture, Scott Hassell, chief of corrections at the detention center said.

Many of those at the event and similar events are concerned about national immigration issues on a larger scales.

Most of those at the event Saturday were unaware that detainees housed in Etowah County are in custody because of criminal charges and not just held awaiting deportation.

Hassell said Owino came to Etowah County's detention center from the California Department of Corrections, where he was charged with robbery with a weapon. Owino, from Kenya, was in the United States legally attending college, when he was arrested. Upon conviction he was held in California. Once he served time in California, he was released to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement for deportation.

He remained in custody in Etowah County because he was fighting deportation. He was released in March on bond, Hassell said.

Hassell said detainees in Etowah County are those with criminal charges, with several through the years implicated in the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Detainees can range from criminal charges of DUI to homicide.

Entrekin said those who oppose immigration detention make a choice.

"They choose to take the word of someone who has an ax to grind," he said.

Aurea Martinez from Washington, D.C. represents Detention Watch, a watchdog group for detention centers.

She too, has never been inside but said the Etowah County Detention Center is ranked among the worst in the country based on the complaints of lack of health

care and the long periods of time in which detainees are held.

“It’s important to show them that we’re thinking about them,” she said.

Christina Mansfield is from San Francisco and represents Community Initiatives or Visiting Immigrants in Confinement.

She said in 2013, her group was allowed to interview detainees to find out their concerns. She said she has been in the detention center and finds the conditions “deplorable” but could not explain in more detail about the conditions.

She said inmates are neglected, the food is bad and medical care is inadequate.

Hassell said the detention center has always allowed advocacy groups access.

The detention center is accredited by the American Correctional Association and the medical facility within the jail is accredited by the National Committee of Correctional Health Care, which is the organization that approves medical accreditation, similar to the organization that accredits hospitals.

“We’re not perfect, but we always correct any findings right away,” he said.

He said detainees often refuse medical treatment to protest detainment.

Hassell said any special dietary restrictions are met and many detainees have religion or cultural restrictions.

He said they have attempted to allow immigration detainees to participate in programs such as the puppy program regular inmates can participate in. It is a program that allows inmates to work with animals for obedience training and other methods of training.

Hassell said that did not work out because a detainee with cultural differences used rubber bands to wrap around the puppy’s genitals as punishment.

“We just could not allow something like that,” he said.

He said they offered the fisheries program to immigration detainees, as well, but nobody signed up.

“Their purpose is to get out of detention and fight deportation,” he said.

The issues with immigration detainees are not new to the sheriff’s office, Entrekin said.

“We’re in the business of housing detainees,” he said. “Not everyone is going to agree about how we’re doing it.”

He said most of the complaints relate to immigration detention in general.

“We meet every standard,” he said. “But if you’re wanting tacos and they’re serving spaghetti that day, you’re going to complain about the food.”

Entrekin said the group promised a peaceful event and there were no issues.

He said he wasn’t surprised at the low turnout.

“I think it would be interesting to see how many would show up in support of immigration if somebody organized an event like that,” Entrekin said.

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