

## ICE visitation ban lifted at detention centers

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ADELANTO >> A group visiting immigrant detainees at the Adelanto Detention Center has resumed visits after officials with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement suspended their visitation rights indefinitely.

The Friends of Adelanto Detainees group was not given a formal reason why they were cut off from the detainees, said Victoria Mena, coordinator of the Adelanto “Friends” program. But on Monday they were back visiting detainees again.

Mena said issues started for the group back in July.

“Friends” had finally gotten clearance that month to go into the detention center and visit detainees, she said. But about a week and a half after receiving that permission, they got an email saying their program was suspended until further notice and that visitation was not allowed.

On July 24, Mena received an e-mail from Wesley J. Lee, assistant field office director for Adelanto Detention Facility, saying: “The Friends of Adelanto (Detainees) Program has been suspended until further notice. Please let your participants know as they will not be able to access Adelanto detainees.”

The group held a rally on Aug. 6 outside the facility, protesting their visit suspensions.

But the reasons for those suspensions were never fully clear.

ICE officials said that members of the organization knowingly bypassed ICE’s detention standards by not disclosing the nature of their visits to the facility, specifically bringing media in without coordinating properly with the agency ahead of time and by not adhering to ICE privacy requirements.

Early this month, the ACLU of Southern California and the Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) — a national group that aims to end abuse of immigrant detainees — sent two letters to ICE asking for the visitation programs at three detention centers in Southern California, including Adelanto, to be reinstated.

The ACLU said the programs were “abruptly suspended” on July 24, after Christina Fialho, co-executive director of CIVIC, published a blog post on the Huffington Post criticizing ICE’s treatment of gay detainees.

But when Friends of Adelanto Detainees did not hear from ICE on why the group was suspended or how to get reinstated, the group submitted a letter on Aug. 12, withdrawing their request for a formal program, among other things.

On Aug. 16 they were told their visitation rights were re-instated.

In a statement issued by ICE on Aug. 16, officials said: “U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement takes the health, safety, and welfare of those in our care very seriously. ICE has detention standards in place to safeguard the privacy of detainees in custody, which were bypassed by some members of the organization.

“ICE officials have reviewed CIVIC’s therapeutic visitation program and notified CIVIC that they may resume the program, as long as its execution is consistent with ICE privacy policies.”

Mena said they have worked with CIVIC, which offers help to groups regarding information about visiting detainees, but they are separate organizations, so the suspension should not have applied to the “Friends” group.

“CIVIC is there to support all forms of community visitation,” she said.

On Monday, Mena went to the Adelanto facility to visit detainees. She said she was denied one visit because of scheduling conflicts, but she was allowed to visit with another person.

Mena said visitations like that are important to the detainees, who are held because of their immigration status, while their family and friends could be thousands of miles away.

“A lot of people are really passionate about ending that isolation and just being a friend,” Mena said. “We come say hi, share time with them, just tell them they have a friend.”

Now that the Friends program can resume visits, they plan to fight against the planned Adelanto facility expansion.

A rally is scheduled Wednesday at the ICE Los Angeles field office.

“When the facility first opened it had 650 beds. In the past two years, it has doubled and now has 1,300 beds,” Mena said. “They want to expand it by 600 beds when already the conditions are not good there and they have attempted to shut the community out.”