

Immigration visitors blocked at detention centers

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SANTA ANA, Calif.—Immigration authorities have blocked volunteer visitors at three Southern California detention centers in what an immigrant advocate has decried as an effort to silence her blogging about conditions in the country's detention system.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement suspended volunteer visitation programs at facilities in Santa Ana, Irvine and Adelanto late last month.

Christina Fialho, co-founder of Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement, said Wednesday that she believes her nonprofit is being silenced because she blogged about conditions for transgender detainees at the Santa Ana Jail for the Huffington Post.

Immigration officials are reviewing the programs and will discuss their future with leaders of the visitation groups, said Lori Haley, an ICE spokeswoman.

In a conversation with an ICE official, Fialho said she was told that her blogging transformed her into a media representative and she would need to give the agency advanced notice if she planned to continue to write for the web site.

"This is really a first amendment issue," Fialho said. "We feel that volunteer visitors play an essential role to support people in immigration detention, to support their families, and when we see abuses it is our duty as Americans to speak up and try to rectify a situation."

What immigration officials appear to see as an issue of media access is viewed by Fialho and the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California as an issue of free speech.

The ACLU wrote a letter Tuesday denouncing the suspension of the programs as an apparent act of retaliation after ICE officials reviewed Fialho's blog post and comments made by volunteers on their Facebook pages.

More than 130 volunteers have been trained by Fialho's network to reach out to immigrant detainees at the three Southern California detention sites and help connect them with their families. The network assists detainees in 28 locations across the country.

On July 22, Fialho wrote for the Huffington Post blog that staff working in a specialized custody unit of the Santa Ana Jail for gay and transgender detainees has not received sufficient training.