

# The Gadsden Times

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## Group stages brief protest outside detention center

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A group of about 20 people staged a demonstration Sunday outside the Etowah County Detention Center, protesting a decision a few weeks ago to end their visitation with immigration detainees in the center.

Etowah County Sheriff's Office Director of Communications Natalie Barton said the sheriff's office had no advance notice of the demonstration. After receiving calls about it, Chief Deputy Michael Barton and other deputies went to check on what was going on.

Sheriff Todd Entrekin said apparently 20 to 25 people with signs met at the visitation area at the jail and walked up Ninth Street to Forrest Avenue and back. Entrekin said after deputies went to the area, the group dispersed and left.

"I don't think the deputies ever spoke to them," he said. "We do know they did not have a permit with the city of Gadsden for the demonstration. I expect them to be back."

The Etowah Visitation Project's Facebook page for the event, "Vigil to Restore Visitation," invited people to join the group for the 4 p.m. protest.

"For years, EVP members have provided companionship, courage, solace and a connection to the outside world for detainees in the Etowah immigration center, many of whom have loved ones who live hundreds or thousands of miles from Alabama," the Facebook page post states. "A few weeks ago, Etowah Sheriff Todd Entrekin decided his office was 'ending our ties' with the project, offering no explanation."

Entrekin said the group initiated a visitation program with detainees more than a year ago.

"When they first came, they were allowed in," the sheriff said.

The organization presented itself as one aiming to provide company to detainees who didn't have any family close by to visit, and to bring things detainees might need.

"They started violating the rules," Entrekin said.

Natalie Barton said the jail has rules in place for any group that comes in, such as ministerial groups, to visit people in the jail.

The EVP visitors started urging detainees not to participate in programs the center provides for their benefit — the fisheries program, and the dog training program — Entrekin said.

He said the group told detainees they were cooperating with the center if they participated. The group urged detainees to file complaints, Entrekin said, rather

than providing company and comfort to them.

“When we had proof they were violating our rules, we ended their visitation,” he said.

The group’s goal is to do away with ICE detention, Entrekin said.

“Like all non-governmental organizations, they don’t believe in detention,” he said. “They want to end it.”

The group’s post goes on to condemn the action as an act of retaliation against detainees and the project, coming on the heels of a complaint filed by Community Initiative for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement against some ICE officers and a deputy, and for the Father’s Day demonstration the group staged in June.

The complaint is filed on behalf of 20 detainees — two who have been released and are named and 18 still in custody, who are identified by initials.

The complaint alleges detainees have been beaten by ICE officers when they resist signing travel documents, and if they refuse to sign, ICE officers would subdue them and take their thumbprints as a signature.

The complaint was filed with the Office for Civil Rights & Civil Liberties. In the complaint, CIVIC calls for the termination of the ICE contract with the Etowah County Detention Center.

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