

Community Support Services as an Alternative to Immigration Detention Case Study: First Friends Community Supportive Post-Release Program

Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC)'s mission is to end the isolation and abuse of men, women, and children in U.S. immigration detention through visitation, independent monitoring, storytelling, and advocacy. It is our belief that no one deserves to be isolated and that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity.

Across the country, communities are building post release support programs. Many of these post release programs have grown out of immigration detention visitation programs, which have seen the tremendous need for a system of support on the outside once a person is released from detention. In many cases, these programs also are actively working to secure the release of people from detention.

Since 2010, we have seen an increase demand for direct support for released detainees due to ICE's pre-emptive parole policy for asylum seekers as well as the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and ICE as of June 01, 2013, initiating community-based alternatives as a pilot program. It also is noteworthy that since early 2014, visitation programs around the country have seen drastic changes in the populations held at immigration detention facilities. For example, at the Ramsey County Jail in Minnesota and at the West County Detention Facility in California, we used to visit primarily with people who had some form of past criminal conviction. Today, the majority of people with whom we visit and support at these facilities are recent asylum seekers.

Visitation programs have responded to this change by piloting post-release accompaniment programs. For example, First Friends, a visitation program affiliated with CIVIC, in collaboration with LIRS and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is piloting a community-based alternative to immigration detention program that offers holistic services to promote positive integration outcomes for individual released from immigration detention. The purpose of First Friends' Community Supportive Post-Release Program is to provide wraparound services to individuals released from immigration detention who remain in removal proceedings, encourage compliance with conditions of release, respect the human rights and individual liberties of migrants, and foster community inclusion.

First Friends explains:

“First Friends provides comprehensive support to individuals, ensuring legal, case management and housing services are available to encourage safe release and integration of immigrants upon release from detention. In particular, we facilitate immigrant integration in the New Jersey and New York area in collaboration with local service providers.



We have a case manager, who offers individualized case management services for individuals eligible for Community Support services, such as providing access to legal, education, employment/and or vocational training, medical, mental health care, spiritual and religious, and civic, or social engagement services. We provide accompaniment, to ICE reporting's, court proceedings, and all other appointments as needed. We work with individuals until clients demonstrate self-sufficiency and after clients' removal cases are concluded.

Since 2011, First Friends saw a need to establish a support group for released detainees as the organization's sustenance for released detainees grew. Individuals meet on a quarterly basis in a form of a social setting to disseminate useful beneficial information and resources that can help them gain stability, and independence in their communities. The support group brings together diverse individuals who share similar experiences of being in detention, sharing commonality of stories through a healing process, but more importantly creating an environment to nurture support for one another.

The referral process with ICE in their facilitation of the release to the care of LIRS local partner, First Friends is consistent with the commitments made by ERO in the Referrals for Community Supported Release Program Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed with on April 4, 2013. ICE screens individuals for possible release and participation in the program and sends referrals to First Friends once individuals consent to the program and sign a privacy waiver. ICE is able to facilitate an in person interview with First Friends and the individuals after which First Friends determines based on individual needs and housing capacity which individuals will participate in the program.

The biggest thing is that this program is for people who are either already in detention or are going to be detained simply because they cannot show community ties. Individuals that are released through the pilot program were asked to report every 90 days. The individuals screened for release were mostly arriving asylum seekers who were able to prove their identity, passed CFI, and was determined not to be threat to the community, but has no support to be released to then, First Friends will receive the referrals. The pilot program has expired as of this year; however the same procedures are followed in our collaboration with ICE NJ and NY.

Since early 2014, First Friends has provided wrap around case management services to 73 clients, which includes families, unaccompanied minors, and affirmative and defensive asylum seekers. 25 additional individuals were assisted with short term assistance which included being picked up late at night from detention centers and county jails, being transported to the bus and or train station and coordinating transport logistics to family in different states. Of the 25, 15 were assisted with 1-2 nights' temporary stay, while family members coordinated with First Friends to purchase bus and train tickets.

We continue to be challenged by housing which limits us getting more individuals out of detention, but we have set the platform to actively participate in efforts to create a more humane



and responsible alternative. Our work has given us the opportunity to transform government policies to be less reliant on incarceration.”

To learn more about Post Release Support Services in your area, email CIVIC at info@endisolation.org or call us at 385-212-4842.

