

Sheriff Jonathon W. Horton  
Etowah County Detention Center  
827 Forrest Avenue  
Gadsden, Alabama 35901

December 3, 2019

Dear Sheriff Horton,

We, the undersigned 62 community organizations, legal service providers, faith-based institutions, and fellow community visitation programs are writing to express grave concern with your recent decision to block access to the Etowah Visitation Program at the Etowah County Detention Center following a peaceful protest outside the facility. Respectfully, we urge you to reconsider and to reinstate the program immediately.

The visitation program at the Etowah County Detention Center has been in operation since 2013. Programs like this one exist to provide support to detained immigrants, and, in some instances, even shine a light on serious abuse or harm that detained immigrants are experiencing. These programs also play a key role providing support to detained immigrants and helping ameliorate the extreme isolation experienced within detention.

The latter point is particularly important given that study after study has documented the detrimental effect that detention has on an individuals' physical and mental health, particularly in cases of prolonged or indefinite detention, which is often the case at the Etowah County Detention Center. On the topic of mental health, one study<sup>1</sup> states that there is "robust and consistent evidence" that migrant populations are "more vulnerable to mental illness, particularly de-pression and [post-traumatic stress disorder] PTSD." The study also cited that depression and anxiety was high and common among detained migrants. "Time spent in immigration detention," moreover, was cited as an additional "post-migration stressor."

Although certainly not the only example, the case of [Jeancarlo Alonso Jimenez-Joseph](#), previously detained at the Stewart Detention Center, exemplifies the tragic mental health consequences of isolation in detention. Jimenez-Joseph died by suicide after being placed in solitary confinement for 19 days. During this time, Jimenez-Joseph, who had repeatedly expressed suicidal thoughts, was denied a visit by the local visitation program there.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s12888-018-1945-y>

Shutting down the program at this detention center will almost certainly have an impact on immigrants detained there, particularly those who have already developed rapport with visitors and who are accustomed to receiving visits. While there has not been an example of anyone detained in Etowah County Detention Center dying by suicide, the men detained there have regularly identified issues of medical neglect, racism on behalf of officers, physical abuse,<sup>2</sup> and a general lack of order or justice within the center. At this moment, there are men inside of the Etowah County Detention Center whose mental health we know to be deteriorating. In the past, visitors have been able to notice their decline and have worked to provide support to them. Indeed, men have spoken to visitors about thoughts and even plans of suicide before. Denying them visits withdraws the much needed social support that the Etowah Visitation Project provides.

Once again, given the crucial services that this program provides, we urge you to immediately reinstate the program. Across the country, we will all be paying close attention to the decision your office takes and are prepared to continue supporting the Etowah Visitation Project until it's essential visitation rights are reinstated.

Sincerely,

Adelante Alabama Worker Center  
Adjunct Justice  
Al Otro Lado  
Alianza Americas  
Allies to End Detention (Otay Allies)  
American Civil Liberties Union - Alabama (ACLU-AL)  
American Friends Service Committee, Colorado  
AVID - Advocate Visitors with Immigrants in Detention in the  
CAIR Coalition  
Chihuahuan Desert  
CIVIC ABQ  
Civil Rights Education and Enforcement Center (CREEC)  
Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM)  
Detained Migrant Solidarity Committee (DMSC)  
Detention Watch Network (DWN)  
Disability Rights Advocates  
Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries  
Diversidad Sin Fronteras Texas

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.freedomforimmigrants.org/etowah>

Etowah Visitation Project  
Families for Freedom  
First Friends of NJ & NY  
Freedom for Immigrants  
Friends of Baker Detainees  
Friends of Broward Detainees  
Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees  
Georgia Detention Watch  
Grand Rapids Rapid Response to ICE  
Grassroots Leadership  
Houston Migrant Outreach Coalition  
Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights  
Immigrant Defense Project  
Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice  
Innovation Law Lab  
Justice Strategies  
La ColectiVA  
Louisiana Advocates for Immigrants in Detention  
Louisiana Immigrants' Right's Coalition  
Mano Amiga  
Mid-South Immigration Advocates  
National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC)  
New Sanctuary Coalition  
NH Immigrant Visitation Program  
No Detention Centers in Michigan  
North West Indiana Resist  
Opening Doors International  
Partnerships for Trauma Recovery  
Public Counsel  
Queer Detainee Empowerment Project  
Quixote Center  
Reformed Church of Highland Park Detention Visitation Project  
Refugee Support Network  
Sanctuary DMV  
SFV Indivisible (Immigration Division)  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Institute Justice Team  
Southeast Immigrant Rights Network (SEIRN)  
Southern Poverty Law Center  
St. Louis Inter-Faith Committee on Latin America  
Tutwiler Amigos

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee  
United Stateless  
UnLocal, Inc  
Voces Unidas