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\(^1\) 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.

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, 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 (Oyay 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

2 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