

New Illinois law allows pastoral workers to visit immigrant detainees

Michelle Martin Catholic News Service | Feb. 18, 2009

Immigration and the Church

CHICAGO -- Supporters of the religious rights of immigrants detained by the federal government celebrated the passage of a law requiring Illinois state and county detention facilities to allow detained immigrants to meet with pastoral workers.

The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, of which the Archdiocese of Chicago and many other Catholic institutions are members, held a press conference Feb. 17 to spread the word about the law at a Methodist church across the street from Chicago, Cook County and Illinois state offices.

The law grants religious workers "reasonable access" to immigrants being held in state and county facilities.

Joshua Hoyt, executive director of the coalition, recognized the efforts of Mercy Sisters JoAnn Persch and Pat Murphy, who started lobbying for the law after talking to family members of deportees outside a local U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement processing facility.

Every Friday early in the morning, the two sisters faithfully attend prayer vigils at the facility as men and women who are being deported leave for the airport in vans and buses while their families wait outside, hoping their loved ones can catch a glimpse of them as they go.

It was in speaking with family members that the sisters, who have been attending the vigils since January 2007, learned the deportees relied on their faith but had little or no access to pastoral care or counseling while in federal custody.

Most of the time, they are held in county jails under contract to the federal government. The McHenry County Jail generally has a population of 400 federal immigration detainees each day -- for which ICE pays \$95 per person per day. Another facility, located in Ullin, has 350 beds for detainees, Hoyt said.

So the sisters decided to do something about it.

They began going to the McHenry County Jail, and now have access to detainees who are newly arrived as part of the orientation process, along with Dave Warren, who has been visiting people in the jail for more than 10 years.

But their visits are extremely limited, Sister Persch said.

"There was one week when Dave and I were on our own and we saw 70 detainees in an hour," she said. "So you can tell we're not giving good pastoral care."

Rabbi Darrell Crystal of KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation and the Jewish Council of Urban Affairs described a recent visit to the McHenry jail with Sister Persch and Sister Murphy.

While there, they listened to a Mexican woman who was in tears over the separation of her children from her family, and they also received the thanks of Muslim detainees for whom they were able to provide copies of the Quran, the sacred book of Islam. Among them was a young woman from Iran who spoke only Farsi and was unable to communicate with anyone at the jail, Rabbi Crystal said.

Brian Wilkins offered testimony about members of his family, from Bulgaria, who were detained in McHenry. His father was at first denied his Bible, because it was in Bulgarian, he said, and their pastor was not allowed to visit. Conditions improved after Wilkins was able to get a special bill introduced in Congress to allow his relatives to stay.

The new state law, which was passed unanimously by both the Illinois House of Representatives and the Illinois Senate Nov. 20, was signed by then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich Dec. 31. It is to take effect June 1.

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