

BRING *the* SKY

The LIRS Detention Visitation Guide



Lutheran Immigration
and Refugee Service



MODULE 3

Ministry Basics

Establishing
a Visitation
Program for
Detained
Migrants

About LIRS



Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

migrant children, and support for migrants at risk of deportation and detention and their families. LIRS advocates for welcome, working with government officials to craft laws and policies that preserve human dignity and guiding churches as they support newcomers through the ups and downs of transition into U.S. society.

With an expertise born of decades of service experience, LIRS works with at-risk migrants, offering critical legal and social support to asylum seekers, torture survivors, and other vulnerable individuals. This expertise, experience, and compassion inform the agency's advocacy for just and humane treatment of those who seek protection, freedom, and opportunity in the United States.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has been a champion for vulnerable migrants and refugees since 1939. The organization provides resettlement and community integration services for refugees, specialized care for

About *Bring the Sky*



Abdinisir Mohamed, a Somali journalist, was imprisoned and tortured when he stood up to a terrorist organization. Abdinisir escaped and fled to the United States.

But instead of finding welcome, his freedom was taken again. Abdinisir was detained, shackled, and interrogated for 16 hours before being hauled off to a detention cell.

When a visitor asked him if he missed his family, Abdinisir replied, "I miss my family, but I miss the sky more than anything else. Is American sky blue?"

Abdinisir was freed after seven months and was granted asylum. Many others are held for even longer. All share the same intense longing for a glimpse of freedom. By visiting detained migrants, you can bring that glimpse of freedom—you can bring the sky. A 30- or 60-minute visit can refresh a detainee's spirit, revitalize her courage, rekindle his hope.

Bring the Sky: The LIRS Detention Visitation Guide is a series of inspirational and practical resources to help you touch the lives of detained migrants and be touched by the experience. It was developed as part of an ongoing collaboration with the Presbyterian Church (USA) to provide assistance to those affected by immigration detention.

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Introduction

We may miss opportunities for service when we don't know where to start. Creating a detention visitation ministry from scratch is a particularly daunting task. The walls and bars and fences that keep migrants in detention seem also to keep out those who would be glad to visit them.

This brief guide will help you make a path through the red tape and past the razor wire to the people who need the support and encouragement you can bring through a visitation ministry.

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Locate an Immigration Detention Center Near You

Your first step will be to find out if there is a nearby detention facility you can visit. A map of facilities is posted at www.lirs.org/dignity. If no facility is close enough, you can still touch the lives of detained migrants. Module 5 of *Bring the Sky: The LIRS Detention Visitation Guide*, "Farther Steps: Supporting Migrants Through Advocacy and Community Care," will point you toward additional avenues of service.

If you find a site near you, it is important to do your research and gather information specific to that facility:

- Contact Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service at visitation@lirs.org or 410-230-2700 for information on existing visitation programs. Another group may already have established a ministry at your local facility, in which case you may be able to join their efforts.
- Find out the visitation policies and procedures at the facility. Search the Internet for information pertaining to the site, phone the facility, or visit www.ice.gov/detention-facilities.
- It may be beneficial to begin with a facility tour if you've never been inside a particular center. You can find procedures for requesting a visit in the LIRS Access Toolkit, available at www.lirs.org/dignity.

If you call the detention facility directly, you do not need to be explicit about your interest in starting a visitation program; just make general inquiries about the facility's visitation policies. Be sure to ask the following questions:

- Are individuals allowed to visit immigrants detained in this facility?
- When are visitation hours and is there a time limit on visits?
- Is there a limit to the number of people allowed to visit an individual on any given day?
- Can I bring children?
- Is there a dress code?
- Where would the visit take place?
- What information or identification do visitors have to bring? Should I send anything ahead of time (name, date of birth, nationality, etc.) or can I simply show up the day I would like to visit?
- What else can I expect when I get to the detention center?
- Can I bring books, photos, or other items for the person I am visiting? Do detainees have access to books and other educational resources in the facility?



- What is the procedure for sending a package to a migrant in this facility? What is the correct address to use for sending packages?
- What is the procedure for sending written mail to an individual in this detention facility? What is the correct address to use for sending letters?
- Can I call a detainee? Will I be able to leave a voicemail?

If you know attorneys or other legal service providers who work with detained migrants, they may be able to offer additional advice and insights regarding how the facility operates, whether external programs would be welcomed, bed capacity, living conditions, and other matters. There may also be a chaplain or another established group of volunteers with whom you can network or combine efforts.

Organize Your Program Leadership Team

Before you start a visitation program, make sure you have clear answers to the following questions:

Who are your allies in the community?

Don't tackle the task of developing an entire program alone. It may seem doable at first, but once the magnitude of the details becomes clear and volunteers become interested, it will be impossible to keep up without peer support. Think of like-minded individuals and social ministry groups that are likely to join and become leaders in the group. Churches and other faith-based communities, colleges and universities, and local social service agencies are good places to start. Contact them by phone or e-mail, explain your program's goals, and set up a meeting time in which all interested persons can come together and brainstorm, plan and set goals.

Gather the interested parties and determine who will take on various ministry tasks. Take notes, set timelines, and establish a tentative meeting schedule so if others would like to join the group all participants will have access to the same information. Begin thinking of easy ways to disseminate general facts about your program to raise awareness and raise funds for future programmatic needs.

Expand your circle of allies locally and nationally. Gain friends in your community by educating your neighbors about the impact of the U.S. detention system on individuals, families, and communities. Network with other visitation groups across the country for mutual encouragement and sharing ideas and insights. Look to LIRS (visitation@lirs.org or 410-230-2700) and other national organizations for education and advocacy resources and links to like-minded local groups.

What are you hoping to accomplish?

Setting clear goals and expectations early on will make for smooth program implementation. Group leaders should determine the program's purposes and ensure that all participants are on the same page. Decide how you will measure your program's success. Clearly articulating these goals will help you recruit new volunteers and begin orienting them to the program.

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Think about avenues for widespread community engagement and advocacy. What does your program hope to achieve beyond going into a facility on a regular basis to support detained migrants? For example, how will you educate others about immigration issues, support families separated by detention, assist migrants who are released from detention with nowhere to live, and advocate for more just and humane laws and policies? Networking with visitation programs in other communities will be particularly helpful as you work out your answers to these questions.

What does your program hope to achieve beyond going into a facility on a regular basis to support detained migrants?

Where is the best place to meet and to maintain program documents and materials?

Having a regular meeting place is ideal. Choose a space such as a home, a church fellowship hall, or a café that is comfortable and welcoming to encourage maximum participation in your visitation program.

A common place to store and share documentation is also important. Materials such as training resources, contact information, lists of local service providers, program updates, policies and procedures, and referrals should be maintained for use of all group participants. Online information-sharing tools such as Google Groups (groups.google.com) and Drop Box (www.dropbox.com) are free and convenient. Such a repository will also aid in preserving institutional knowledge as members may come and go over time. However, you must carefully identify documents that contain private information about individuals in detention and implement policies to protect any identifying information. (See page 6 for more help with information management).

When, ideally, would you start visiting migrants in detention?

Set a goal for when your group would like to begin visitation. An exact date is not necessary, but it may help keep people on track for completing necessary tasks.

How will you spread the word about your new ministry?

Creating local publicity around the launch of your program could be an effective way of engaging local community members and other congregations, as well as bringing attention to the ministry you are creating. LIRS recommends notifying local media and targeting faith-based groups, social service organizations, ministry organizations and other likeminded institutions. But first determine whether publicity will have a positive or negative impact on your relationships with local community partners. If publicity could potentially be damaging, at least at the onset, keep outreach at the face-to-face level rather. If publicity would be mutually beneficial, then seek a broader outreach with tools such as flyers, newspaper announcements, and op-eds. Let LIRS know if there are ways we can assist you, and please share your group's media coverage, announcements, or statements by e-mailing us at visitation@lirs.org. We can hold up your successes as examples to other groups.

What do you expect from program volunteers?

Ensuring that your volunteers have a firm understanding of your program's goals and expectations will help them better represent your program, avoid mistakes that might reflect badly on the group, and have a more enjoyable and rewarding experience with visitation.

As the word spreads about your group, interested potential volunteers will want to know how much time they would need to commit to the visitation program. Be prepared to answer these questions: How long will



your training be? How long will each visit be? How often will visits be scheduled? Although each visitation relationship will have its particular needs and dynamics, recommend an average amount of time you expect volunteers to invest in visiting.

As each unique relationship between visitor and detained migrant develops, it should remain within the clearly defined parameters of your program. What core principles and guidelines should volunteers follow? For example, does your group have a rule for whether or not volunteers affiliated with the visitation program should give small donations to a detained individual? If an immigrant expresses a significant need for money to buy stamps or other small items, should volunteers all follow the same guidelines or may they make decisions on an individual basis? What role does faith play in your visitation ministry? Will you provide spiritual support to detainees? What guidelines will you set regarding proselytizing?

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Develop Administrative and Information Management Tools

A shared repository for paperwork and administrative resources will help your program run seamlessly and promote connectedness among leaders and volunteers. LIRS encourages each program to develop and maintain the following administrative tools. Sample documents are included at the end of this module.

E-Mail Address

A dedicated e-mail address for the visitation program is a must-have for internal and external communication. It will help the group organize inquiries, track follow-up responses, and store contact information for current and prospective volunteers. As word spreads about your visitation ministry, a dedicated e-mail address will allow community members to contact you. A few program coordinators should monitor and maintain the account, promptly responding to incoming messages. Use an address through your church or organization's domain, or create a free account through services such as Gmail, Hotmail, or Yahoo.

Program Flyer

Create a simple one-page handout that describes your visitation ministry. Here is a sample outline:

- A paragraph or two about the U.S. immigration detention system.
- A story about how visitation ministry made a difference in the life of a detainee *and* a volunteer (If you're just getting your program off the ground, borrow a story from LIRS or another visitation ministry. Once you have your own stories, use one of those. Refer to the confidentiality guidelines in Module 4 of *Bring the Sky*, "Being a Visitor: Practical Guidance on Visiting Detained Migrants.")
- A brief statement about why your group is inspired to help.
- A concise "job description" outlining the responsibilities program volunteers undertake.
- An invitation to get involved, including how volunteers benefit from participation in this ministry.
- Group contact information. Avoid using personal names, addresses, or e-mails. Stick to the dedicated e-mail address and a church or organization phone number.



Share your brochure or flyer with prospective volunteers, and use it to educate congregations, college groups, and service organizations. Distribute it at community events and send it electronically to anyone who inquires about your program.

Visitor Interest Form or Application

An interest form or application is a screening tool for prospective volunteers. For those who are a good fit with your ministry, the information they supply can further help the program coordinator match volunteers with migrants who have requested visits. For applicants who are not a good fit, be prepared to offer alternative service opportunities or links to other advocacy organizations in the area.

Volunteer Contract

A signed agreement between the volunteer and the program will demonstrate the volunteer's commitment and help hold all participants accountable to the ministry's standards and expectations. Although this is an unpaid volunteer position, a contract will clarify responsibilities and help prevent confusion regarding the program.

Sample Letter Inviting Individuals in Detention to Request Visits

Not everyone in a detention facility will know there are volunteer visitors available to visit them. Developing a general letter that explains how your program operates will help your volunteers connect with individuals in detention. If possible, give copies of your letter to attorneys, chaplains, or other community volunteers who have regular access to detained migrants. Ask the warden, facility official, or ICE field office director for permission to post the letter in the facility where migrants can see it.

Visit Request and Information Disclosure Authorization Form

A visit request form should be attached to the invitation letter. Detained immigrants who would like visitors will complete and sign the form, allowing you to share their information with your volunteers and make appropriate matches with visitors. Again, chaplains, attorneys, and other legal service providers who work with migrants in detention would be an ideal means of delivering this form, explaining it to detainees, and bringing completed forms back to you.

Visitor Information and Detained Immigrant Information

Create and maintain a master list of all volunteers' names, contact information, and detainees with whom they have been matched. This will help the program coordinator or person responsible for making matches know how to contact volunteers and assess their availability to visit additional migrants. Also create and maintain a master list of the migrants who have requested visitors, including name, alien number, date of referral, and date of match. Of course you must be careful to maintain this data in strict confidentiality.

Spreadsheets or tables would be an ideal format for organizing these lists. Because these documents contain confidential information, it is crucial that you maintain them in a location that shields them from access by anyone who does not have an essential need to see them.

A signed agreement between the volunteer and the program will demonstrate the volunteer's commitment and help hold all participants accountable to the ministry's standards and expectations.



Recruit, Screen, and Train Volunteer Visitors

If the ministry director or coordinating team is the steering wheel of your program, the volunteer visitors are the engine. Clearly defining and implementing a process by which you will recruit, screen, and train volunteers will be crucial to the success of your efforts.

Recruit

Where will you find volunteers who are willing and able to be the first visitors representing your ministry at the detention facility? Talk to family members, friends, your congregation, other faith communities, partner agencies, college groups, civic groups, and anyone else you can think of. Use online resources such as Volunteer Match, Idealist, Hands On, and Meet Up. Spread the word through your social media network. Return to the same groups again to reach new members or staff, people who were absent for your first presentation, and individuals who might just need to hear the same message multiple times before it sinks in. Start by recruiting and training a small group who can learn by doing and then orient other volunteers in the future.

Screen

While the ability to speak a language other than English should not be required, take advantage of any diverse language skills when matching volunteers with detainees. Decide whether or not your program will run background checks on all volunteers. If you will, disclose this intent on your interest form or application. Interview applicants in person or by phone to get a clearer sense of each applicant's motives and interest level.

Train

Volunteers training is critical to your program's success. Orient new volunteers to the "ins and outs" of the particular detention center and train them on the program's expectations. Create and share a program manual with visitors, and duplicate any online training materials for them. Modules 1, 2, and 4 of *Bring the Sky: The LIRS Visitation Ministry Guide* will be particularly useful for this purpose. LIRS is able and willing to assist with your training needs. Contact us at visitation@lirs.org or 410-230-2700 for additional information, resources, and support.

Also provide the opportunity for new volunteers to accompany experienced visitors to the detention facility. They should observe how the mentor visitors enter the facility and conduct themselves during the visit. This will allow prospective volunteers to determine whether or not detention visitation is something they would feel confident doing. The experience will allow new volunteers to ask questions, clarify expectations, and dispel unnecessary anxiety and awkwardness. It will also allow the mentor to note any issues that might indicate a need for additional training or a red flag regarding the new volunteer's suitability for the program.

Return to the same groups again to reach new members or staff, people who were absent for your first presentation, and individuals who might just need to hear the same message multiple times before it sinks in.



Identify Detained Immigrants Who Need and Want Visits

Of course you will want your ministry to support and encourage as many detained migrants as possible through visitation. But how will you identify individuals who need and want visits? Detention facility staff cannot distribute any names or personal information, but they may be willing to post a flyer about your program. Attorneys or volunteers who represent detainees or conduct Legal Orientation Programs or Know Your Rights presentations within the facility will probably welcome the opportunity to share your program information with individuals in detention. Chaplains and other religious leaders who have access to the facility are another resource for informing migrants of the opportunity to request visits. Once you make initial contacts with detainees, they can share your invitation with others. Though it is less common, you may also receive referrals from family members who are unable to visit the detention facility themselves, but would appreciate the support and encouragement you can offer to their loved ones.

Whatever means you use, once you have made initial contact with detainees, be sure to record their names and other information in a confidential data document as described on page 7.

Peer support is imperative to the long-term success of the program and for sustained relationships between visitors and individuals in detention.

Match Volunteers with Detainees and Begin Visits

Once you have trained volunteers and identified migrants interested in receiving visits, make appropriate matches and visit away! Create opportunities for volunteers to share their experiences, encourage one another, and help each other work through any challenges they've encountered. Regular face-to-face meetings and online community tools such as e-mail, Google or Yahoo groups, and Yuku or other forum hosts will help you facilitate this interaction. Peer support is imperative to the long-term success of the program and for sustained relationships between visitors and individuals in detention. As your community of volunteers grows and learns, they may also want to engage with local and national advocacy efforts.