Steps Beyond Education, Advocacy & Community Care
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 migrant children, and support for at-risk migrants 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, or opportunity in the United States.

Abdinasir Mohamed, a Somali journalist, was imprisoned and tortured when he stood up to a terrorist organization. Abdinasir escaped and fled to the United States. But instead of finding welcome, his freedom was taken again. Abdinasir 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, Abdinasir replied, “I miss my family, but I miss the sky more than anything else. Is American sky blue?” Abdinasir 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. 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**

By now, if you’ve mapped out a course of action and begun making visits to people in detention, you have accomplished something incredible. *Thank you for standing with LIRS as a champion of our shared mission of welcome, and blessings on your visitation ministry!*

If you are volunteering for detention visitation, we recommend that you focus exclusively on that role, taking as long as you need to get comfortable. Once you’ve gotten grounded in the role of visitor, we encourage you to consider steps beyond the visitation program, or to prepare others to take those steps. In that case, you may wish to diversify your ministry by engaging with your community in other ways. Education, advocacy, and community care for people who have been released are all possible “steps beyond.”

**Education**

Most people have no idea of the extent to which immigrants are being detained in the U.S., often right in their backyard, nor do they know how they can respond to immigrants’ needs in their community. You can be the bridge that connects them to people in detention.

The first step is educating yourself. After you know more, conversations with neighbors and members of your church will come more naturally. The appendix of this module lists some good learning resources, and the LIRS detention page ([www.lirs.org/dignity](http://www.lirs.org/dignity)) is also a good place to start. Remember, though, that while a mastery of written materials is helpful, it’s your first-hand knowledge of detention that is your greatest strength. If you’ve visited a detention center, you’ve seen the reality with your own eyes, and you are best suited to educate others on the hardships people in detention are facing.

Once you feel comfortable with the topic yourself, you can begin reaching out to your community. Congregations or other faith-based institutions, community-based organizations, social service agencies, colleges and universities, and local media are all potential avenues for successful engagement. You can start by reaching out to a key member of any of the above-mentioned institutions – it may even be at your own church! Here are some of the things you can offer to host or help organize:

- A movie night where you screen any one of several gripping films that show the detention crisis
- A bible study that explores the scriptural roots of the mission of welcome and detention visitation
- A short presentation on your experiences visiting people in detention

For each of these events, it’s important to follow up with a short information session about immigration and the crisis of detention. It’s also particularly vital to set aside time for people to ask questions. Remember that if people ask hard questions, it’s probably because they are lacking the very information that you’re there to provide.
Debunking myths and offering reliable resources (see our “Mythbusters” guide at www.lirs.org/advocacy) inspires others to continue learning and do their own research. If you’re patient and provide the facts, you may create another ally for people in detention.

While your primary purpose may be to educate, it’s best to be able to offer people ways to become engaged right on the spot. That means, first and foremost, being ready to collect the contact information of people at your educational event. It may also mean extending an invitation to take part in your next orientation for new volunteers, or explaining other ways people can make a difference.

Community Care

Many people released from detention often need support finding housing, accessing social services, navigating their new environment, and reuniting with family members or friends in other parts of the United States.

As a community member, you can move beyond visitation by offering to help people in meeting their needs when they’ve been released from immigration detention. This support can take many forms, among them:

- Hosting an immigrant released from detention in your home until they’re able to live independently
- Offering transportation to and from ongoing appointments
- Helping an individual find no- or low-cost medical care (or a mental health professional, if needed)
- Inviting an individual to recreational events or community activities to learn and make friends
- Collecting and distributing life’s necessities, whether food, clothing, or other items
- Enrolling an individual in English classes, if needed, or other educational courses

Depending on a person’s needs, the level and kind of support will vary. It will take your own ingenuity and compassion to figure out how to deal with these needs in a responsive, compassionate way that’s appropriate for each person. But in all situations, your friendliness and support for people as they transition into a new life is incredibly valuable.

Advocate

Seeing the hardships of people in detention may move you to take a stance on immigration. You may decide to take action by advocating for fair laws that recognize international human rights, prioritize family unity, and respect individuals’ rights to freedom and dignity.

One of the most straightforward and important ways to become an advocate is to call or visit your members of Congress or organize a delegation of friends and volunteers to come to Washington, DC. For more information on current national legislation and immigration policies, you can visit www.lirs.org/advocacy and click on the “Action Center.” There, you can also voice your opinion to your elected members of Congress and the White
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House. The appendix at the end of this module lists more advocacy tips and educational materials.

While we strongly encourage you to contact your elected officials, no one action will change the system tomorrow. However, continued action, coupled with education, will one day make a significant impact on the way this nation welcomes immigrants. Here are a few ways in which you can be part of the longer-term effort to eliminate the policy mistakes that make detention visitation necessary:

- Join the LIRS Stand for Welcome campaign at www.lirs.org/sfw to receive periodic advocacy action alerts.
- Host a vigil or public protest near a detention facility. Make a video of the event and post it on LIRS’ Facebook page.
- Keep up to date on the latest advocacy strategies by visiting www.lirsblog.org and commenting on detention-related posts. We’d love to hear what you think.
- Write an op-ed for a local or national newspaper. This is an excellent way to educate and mobilize people in your community and beyond. Be sure to forward the news clip along to LIRS.
- Start or join an immigrant task force to tackle local issues affecting immigrants in your community. If you’d like help with this, contact LIRS at visitation@lirs.org or 410-230-2700.

There’s enormous value to the comfort and healing you can offer to people through detention visitation. But being an advocate for fair alternatives to the current system is a way to go after the causes, rather than the symptoms, of the problems facing people in detention.

More Steps Beyond

Standing with people in detention need not be limited to the ways discussed above. Whatever creativity you bring to tackling these issues will be rewarded! Here are some additional ideas, in hopes they will inspire your ministry.

Expand Your Visitation Program. There are plenty of people in detention with no access to the outside world who would love a visitor, so the more volunteers you can recruit and train, the better. To get a better idea of how to connect with individuals in your area, please contact LIRS at visitation@lirs.org or 410-230-2700. We have resources and materials that may help you reach out and inspire your friends, family members, neighbors, and members of your church.

Develop Resources for Detention Visitation. Every visitation program should have up-to-date training, outreach, and educational materials for distribution to volunteers and community members. These materials may include basic descriptions of the local detention facility, who is detained and why, how people can become visitors, and how family members can contact detained loved ones. Another great resource to create is a list of social service agencies, churches, and other community organizations with whom to partner for post-release community care. A model for your efforts can be found in the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project’s “A Guide to the Northwest Detention Center” pamphlet, which provides friends and family of detained people with the most practical...
information they need in order to navigate this particular facility. You can find the pamphlet in the appendix below.

**Pray for Immigrants.** Remember detained immigrants in your personal prayers. Lift them up in the prayers of your congregation. There may be church or community forums, whether in print, online, or in person, that make it easy for you to alert others to your prayers in this regard. Host a prayer vigil outside a detention facility to engage your community and demonstrate to the staff of the facility that the people within the facility matter.

**Become a Pen Pal with a Person in Detention.** People in detention are often starved for contact with the outside world, and a kind word in the form of a letter can make a difference. Writing letters is a good way to become involved if physically visiting an immigrant in detention isn’t an option for you. Contact LIRS for more information at visitation@lirs.org or 410-230-2700.

**Teach English.** Simply communicating can be a make-or-break challenge in the lives of immigrants and refugees. You can make an enormous difference by volunteering to teach or practice English with people released from detention. Not only is the practice a positive activity while in detention, it also helps people integrate more easily if they are released. See below for more resources on teaching English to this community.

**Teach U.S. Culture.** For a person who grew up in another country, learning about life in the United States increases integration success. What is Thanksgiving? Halloween? What cultural norms might help them gain confidence and build relationships? Are there certain words or terminology that individuals living in your community should be familiar with? In our conversations with individuals who have spent time in immigration detention and since been released, we’ve heard this is a great need and would be very helpful.

**Donate to LIRS.** Help us continue our service and advocacy to better the lives of detained immigrants and their families! You can donate in the following ways: [www.lirs.org/donate](http://www.lirs.org/donate).

**Share Your Stories.** We hope to share your stories and actions to inspire others throughout the country. Please let us know if you have a story you’d like to share by contacting us at visitation@lirs.org or 410-230-2700. We can try to make sure your good ideas reach others through our blog, website, presentations, and publications.

This list of additional “steps beyond” is far from exhaustive. Please feel free to use your own knowledge of your community, church, and individual cases of detention in order to plan creative and inspiring actions!

**Conclusion**

We’ve reached the end of the final module of *Bring the Sky: The LIRS Detention Visitation Guide*. Thank you for reading and reflecting on the call to visitation, the issues at hand, the ways of establishing a
visitation ministry, and the steps beyond.

We know that in the U.S. immigration detention system, 400,000 individuals are detained each year. That’s 400,000 opportunities to answer Jesus Christ’s call to minister to the most vulnerable people. As you go forward, whether with making visits, advocating for just alternatives to detention, or supporting people after their release, LIRS thanks you for your strength, courage, and dedication.

You and the people you inspire are the champions of welcome!

Appendix

Advocacy Tools
LIRS Action Center

Learning Tools
Books and movies on immigration
Bible Studies - “Out of the Waters: Resisting the Power of Fear”
Legal Migration in the U.S. cartoon
Human Rights First asylum flow chart
Alternatives to Detention Report
Jails and Jumpsuits (HRF)
The Math on Immigration Detention (Forum)
Report on Immigration in the U.S.: Detention and Due Process (Organization of American States)
Back to the Basics (UNHCR)
Jailing Refugees (HRW)