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Illinois bill would allow detainees access to religious counselors

Michelle Martin Catholic News Service | May. 13, 2008

CHICAGO -- Mercy Sisters JoAnn Persch and Pat Murphy didn't know too much about the system faced by immigrants who are about to be deported when they started praying outside the Broadview detention center last year.

But their community, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, had committed itself to stand in solidarity with immigrants. When the sisters asked what they could do to support immigrants, Elena Segura, director of the Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform for the Archdiocese of Chicago, suggested they join the regular Friday morning prayer vigil in suburban Broadview. Friday is the day detainees leave the Broadview holding facility on their way to deportation.

There, the sisters met the relatives of immigrants about to be deported. Then they saw how the hearings leading to deportation were handled: with the hearing officer in Chicago and the detainee appearing on video, usually from the McHenry County Jail in Woodstock, where U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement pays $95 per detainee per day to have them housed.

So they went to Woodstock to pray outside the jail. They were told to stop. When they asked to go into the jail to speak with the detainees they were refused.

The two Chicago-based sisters are among the advocates for a bill in the Illinois House of Representatives that would require that detainees have access to visits from religious ministers or clergy.

"These persons have been separated from their families and their communities," states a Catholic Conference of Illinois fact sheet on the bill, HB 2747. "There is much uncertainty about what will happen to them and to their families. Many of these persons are in need of spiritual counseling and religious ministry and services during this time. Although they are being detained, their human dignity must always be respected. They have a right to humane treatment and access to religious ministry."

Jail officials have argued that the sisters have no need to pray with the detainees or offer them pastoral counseling. They say they are following standards created by ICE, which call for detainees to have access to pastoral care from a minister of their faith.

However, Sister JoAnn said, the access the detainees have to a Catholic pastoral minister is limited to a 50-minute visit from a secular Franciscan once every two weeks in the jail library.

"There's no opportunity for one-on-one pastoral counseling," she said. "There might be an occasional Mass, but there are no regular sacraments."

The sisters, Father Brendan Curran and Bob Gilligan of the Catholic Conference of Illinois met with jail officials in early May. The sisters got permission to visit the jail but only to assess how detainees' needs are being met, not to meet with them directly.

Meanwhile, advocates of the bill were working in early May with representatives of the Illinois Sheriffs' Association to come up with wording that would be acceptable to both parties.

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