

Contra Costa sheriff bans ICE detainee advocacy group from visiting jail. Nonprofit calls it retaliation.



Protesters last year picketed Contra Costa Sheriff David Livingston after he met with then Attorney General-to-be Jeff Sessions. On Wednesday, Livingston's office banned an immigration detainee group from visiting the Richmond jail. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

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RICHMOND — The advocacy group that last year went public with allegations of ICE detainee mistreatment is no longer welcome at Contra Costa jails, the Bay Area News Group learned Wednesday and the nonprofit calls it retaliation.

Sheriff David Livingston's department banned volunteers from CIVIC (Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement) from entering the jail Tuesday. An email to the group obtained exclusively by this news agency accuses it of having "habitually violated numerous policies and procedures," and that the organization "poses a security and safety hazard" to the West Contra Costa Jail in Richmond.

In November, CIVIC publicized [allegations of abuse](#) by deputies overseeing female ICE detainees at the Richmond facility.

“I think it’s clearly a violation of our First Amendment rights,” said Rebecca Merton, CIVIC national visitation network coordinator. “I think it’s clearly in retaliation for the people on the inside at West County and the civic advocates on the outside.”

Capt. Kristi Butterfield wrote in the email that CIVIC volunteers “habitually violated” harassment and discrimination regulations, offender treatment rules and other ethics regulations required of jail visitors.

“It was found that through emails, phone calls, radio and newspaper interviews, many of these policies and rules were violated,” Butterfield wrote. “The violations were systemic to the entire organization and were not an anomaly to one or two volunteers.”

A request for comment to the Contra Costa County Sheriff’s Office on Wednesday was not returned.

Based in San Francisco, CIVIC advocates against immigration detention in the United States, and sends volunteers to more than 40 jails to monitor conditions and raise awareness about mistreatment of ICE detainees. Last November, the group circulated a letter signed by 27 female inmates at the Richmond jail, alleging rampant mistreatment that included prolonged lockdowns and failure to provide bathroom breaks.

The publicizing of the letter led to numerous media reports, as well as [calls for investigations](#) from local politicians, including U.S. Rep. Mark DeSaulnier, who called for a federal probe into the matter.

The sheriff conducted its own investigation, and in December [released a statement](#) calling most of the allegations of mistreatment “unfounded,” but conceding a guard had used “profanity” with one inmate, and another hadn’t been given a replacement key to her cell in a timely fashion.

“Now it’s really clear that the internal investigation was not about the alleged abuses, but how the abuses came to light,” Merton said on Wednesday.

Merton asked for specific violations by the group’s 15 to 20 volunteers, but said she has not received those details.

Merton also questioned the timing of the ban.

“Visitors received the ban (Tuesday), the same day Jeff Sessions sued California over various (sanctuary) laws that CIVIC helped draft,” Merton said, referring to legislation that provides state oversight of ICE detention centers. “(Livingston) was

one of the first sheriffs in the country who met with Jeff Sessions after his nomination. It's hard not to see the connection there."

It's not the first time the Contra Costa sheriff has been accused of being vindictive. Last April, after the El Cerrito City Council came out against the jail expansion in Richmond, [Livingston yanked a negotiated agreement](#) the city had with his department to provide 911 dispatch operations.

Nancy Burke, of Courageous Resistance, which also works with detainees at the Richmond jail, said on its face it appears Livingston wanted revenge.

"The theory is that this was coming straight from the sheriff's office. That it was some sort of retaliation," Burke said.

Livingston has been the subject of multiple protests outside the Contra Costa County Administration Building related to immigration issues and allegations that the sheriff collaborated with ICE on deportations, which the office has repeatedly denied.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia has been following the Richmond jail issues and is troubled by the developments.

"I am looking forward to seeing the state Attorney General's report on the allegations," he said, "but I am very concerned that community volunteer groups are being denied an opportunity to help detainees and to independently view their conditions of incarceration."