

The Christ House Newsletter

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For Friends and Family

Fall 2010

For many years now, Christ House's ministry has been focused on asylum-seekers and victims of torture. Since it has become more difficult for detainees to be released from the detention center, we are now working more closely with the volunteers from Riverside Church who are known as Sojourners

Founded in 1999, the Sojourners' **Detention Center Visitor Program** recruits, trains, transports, and mentors volunteers to visit and befriend asylum-seekers held in the Elizabeth Detention Center. The volunteers come from all over New York City, and the group works in collaboration with First Friends, a group sponsored by Quakers in New Jersey. Lawyers from the Human Rights organization are also involved. Some of the volunteers are students from Columbia University, which is a wonderful aspect of the program.

First-time visitors are accompanied by an experienced visitor who mentors them. He or she may be matched with a detainee whom they commit to visit at least twice a month. Sojourners provides transport in Riverside Church owned vehicles from both uptown and downtown Manhattan every to the center six times a month Sat. morn. and every other Tuesday evening

The program has been expanded recently to include Hudson County Jail, because some

of the detainees are being kept there. As far as we can determine, none of them have a criminal record, but maybe incarcerated there for the slightest misdemeanor. Detainees in this facility have even greater problems, because the jailers treat them like criminals, not like the detainees which they are. The rules were both groups are different.



The visitors find their time rewarding, and they do make friends among themselves. But they experience some real sadness and frustration, knowing how the men and women in detention suffer.

Our resident director, Raul Morales, (David, to us here) has been involved with this group for some time because it was obvious that very few men were being released, and many were deported without having a fair hearing with an attorney to represent them.

The weakness of the Sojourners program is that they had only one place to accept men when released: - the Seafarers, a hostel-like residence for transient sailors, which has designated one room for detainees to use for the limited time of three weeks. David is also a member of the post-release committee, which is working to change some of the regulations that make life very difficult for the detainees when released

The symbiotic relationship of sojourners and Christ House is evident to all, and all are committed to moving forward with the relationship. Our last treat residents came through this conduit, and we have affidavits of support out for several men now in detention. Many are being deported. David was in contact with a group of young Chinese a few weeks ago, that on his last visit found they had all been deported



Do not think of EDC as a hotel, or even a modern prison. It is a warehouse for storing human beings.

Elizabeth Detention Center -- it's a windowless, converted warehouse at the end of a dead-end street in a warehouse district just south of Newark Airport. There's no outdoor recreational space, just a room with a small skylight. EDC holds up to 350 non-criminal, non-citizen men and women, including asylum seekers, who by definition are claiming they were persecuted in

their home country because of their religion, political opinion, membership in a particular social group, nationality or ethnicity.

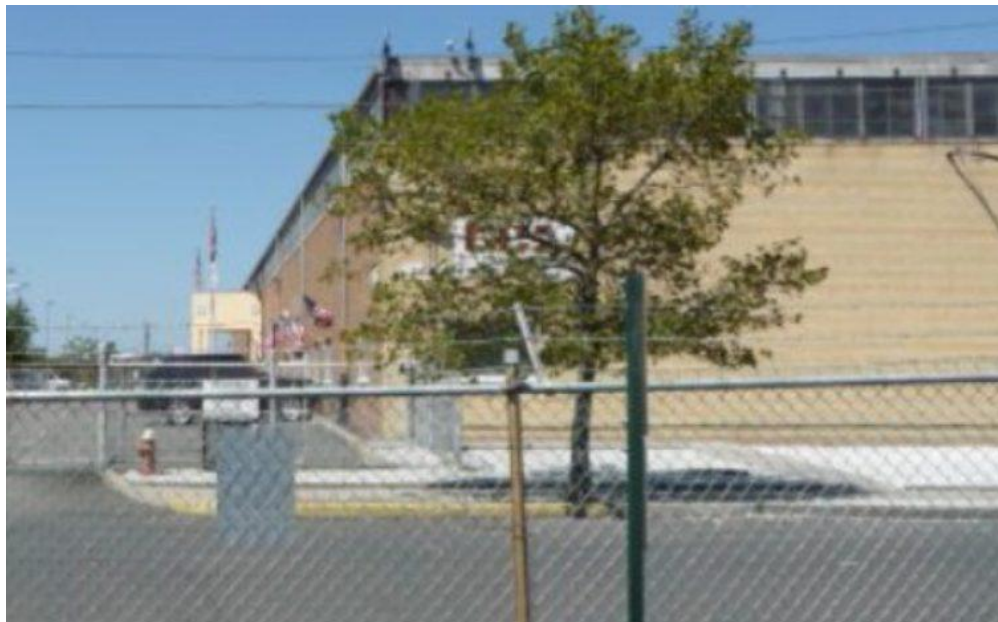
At EDC they live in "dorms" of up to 40 persons in one big room, with toilets and showers in the back, giving no privacy at all.. There's one TV per dorm., ***Continued on the next page. .***

All meals are taken in the dorms. Each dorm has a couple of pay phones -- detainees have to take their turn. The phone system is especially challenging to asylum seekers who need to phone contacts in their home country for documentation for their asylum claim; not only is it costly to phone, but the inmate cannot receive any calls and cannot leave a voice mail message. And when someone answers at the other end of the phone, he/she has to understand English or Spanish ("Press 1 to accept this call"). Many of the asylum seekers Sojourners visits are French-speaking Africans. Bottom line: It's really difficult to document an asylum claim from inside a detention center,

Before January 2010, asylum seekers would spend months, even years in the detention center until final determination on their claim - e.g. three-four months for the first judgment, then

eight or more months more if appealing a denial. Under reforms initiated by DHS recently, asylum seekers who establish their identity, aren't a security risk, have a credible fear of persecution if returned to their home country, *and who have a local address/sponsor*, can be released on parole to pursue their claim from freedom.

Because Sojourners' mission is to extend friendship to detainees with no friends or family nearby to visit them, they increasingly are being asked by the people they visit to sponsor them. As a visitor program, they cannot and do not require our visitors to take the people they visit into their homes, usually small apartments, and become responsible for all their expenses. These inmates are "prime clients" for Christ House's ministry of residence, educational opportunity, contacts for job training, computer literacy, etc.



No matter what angle one chooses, it is a warehouse

Note: asylum seekers aren't allowed to even apply for a work permit for six months, and then it can take another couple of months to obtain it. So they are in a real bind, not allowed to work legally to help pay for their

keep or prepare for the future. This is a situation which reflects badly on the United States of America., a nation built of immigrants.

A list of our recent and present residents will show the “catholicity” of Christ House more than general statements will, so here it is:

Matthew Pitang - Togo, via Brazil
Isaac Nyandwi - Burundi, via Kenya
Amara Camara - Guinea
Marco Romero - Columbia
Vijay Wijesundera - Sri Lanka
Daniel Monpanga - Congo
Thierno Laembek - Guinea
Bashir Mohammed - Somalia

Bashir was with us for several weeks, until we were able to locate family members in Seattle. He fled Somalia because the men operating as pirates were pressuring him to join them; they don't take no as an answer. The pro-bono attorney who helped to secure his release was able to have the firm pay for the plane fare.

Thierno was one of those who think that we are a government facility and that he had the right to operate as if he had rented a room from a landlord. His stay was only for a few days, because we have not the time or energy to deal with anyone who will not cooperate and follow our program and its necessary procedures.



Daniel is our most recent arrival. From the Congo, he has practically no English. The good news is that several other residents are French speaking, as is David, so we can cover the essentials. Daniel has started a class in English, and he is working at it

Matthew is an educated man and has worked in a bank in Brazil. He had polio as a child and one of his legs does not work normally, so this is a real handicap for him getting around and limits the type of work he can seek.

Isaac has a degree from the university in Kenya, which is run by the Jesuits. He lived as a child in a resettlement camp in Kenya. He is presently working on getting a drivers' license so he can have another option in supporting himself as he continues his education. Plan is to go to NYU and take the courses needed to qualify him to do a medical degree

Aime Lufulwabo is now our most recent arrival A Congolese Doctor who was released from Elizabeth Det. Center just a couple of days ago.

Christ House on the Web

www.christhousebronx.com

We are in the process of up-dating and improving our web site. Our goal is to have the information on it that any of our supporters can access, and hopefully refer others to. This includes a history, mission statement and contract we make with residents, plus some stories of former residents.

The mailing list for the newsletter has shrunk over the years because of the inevitable: people move, get preoccupied with other charities, or pass on to God.

We have several parishes that have taken on Christ House as a ministry they want to support. This happens only when an individual cares enough to go to the parish with some information on our ministry, and puts the proposal before them. Please think about being such an angel. There is nothing to lose in the effort!!