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Iowa, other raids rallying points in push for immigration changes

By Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- A year ago a dramatic workplace immigration raid turned the town of Postville, Iowa, on its head, with the arrest of 389 immigrant workers rippling through to most of the town's 2,300 residents, straining resources and ultimately leading to closed businesses around town.

A year before Postville, another large workplace raid of a sewing factory in New Bedford, Mass., roiled that city and captured attention nationwide as widely published photos of distraught children separated from their parents underscored the effect of immigration arrests on families.

Also in 2007, a series of early morning raids on homes in New Haven, Conn., netted 31 people who would be charged with immigration violations, though only four of them were named in the fugitive search warrants used to justify the raids.

On its first anniversary, the raid on Iowa's Agriprocessors meatpacking plant and the earlier raids in New England became benchmarks for weighing U.S. immigration policies. They also have become rallying points for urging Congress to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill and for the Obama administration to change some of its enforcement policies.

Anniversary prayer services and other events around the country organized by religious and labor leaders and other activists, and a May 11 teleconference called attention to the broad and lingering effects of the current immigration system's problems.

"One of the most common questions we get is people saying, 'Things must be better now,'" said Paul Rael, director of Hispanic ministries at St. Bridget Catholic Church in Postville, in the teleconference organized by Justice for Immigrants and the Interfaith Immigration Coalition. "They are not. Our work has changed very little."

If anything, the pressures have become more complex, as families left behind in Iowa, unable to work and with breadwinners deported, come up against new pressures, such as paying for health care and prescriptions. The parish a week earlier hired a counselor to help the community deal with the emotional stresses, Rael said.

Sister Mary McCauley, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary who was pastoral administrator of St. Bridget's at the time of the raid, said in the teleconference that May 12 last year was "the most challenging, traumatic and yet privileged day of my years of ministry."

As she tried to figure out that day what was happening to her parishioners and other families, one person said to her, "Sister, a terrible thing has happened to our town," Sister Mary said.

"It proved to be prophetic."

Even two years after the March 2007 raid at a Michael Bianco factory in Massachusetts, Father Mark Fallon of Catholic Social Services of New Bedford said the experience has had pervasive effects on the community. Of 361 workers detained in that raid, more than 200 have either been released to care for their minor children who are U.S. citizens or are in the process of legalizing their immigration status.

"They call it a 'shadow economy' for a reason," Father Fallon said in the teleconference, explaining that people without legal immigration status lay low to begin with, avoiding contact with government authorities of all kinds, including police.

"When there is an armed federal incursion such as we had in New Bedford, people have even less reason to leave the house," he said.

Lauri Lowell, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council in New Haven, said the home raids in her town came at a time when the board of aldermen had just approved a local identity card, intended to make it easier for immigrants without documentation to function in the civic and business community.

"The mood in town changed from celebration to terrible fear and anxiety," Lowell said. That was followed, however, by an outpouring of community support.

Lowell told of a prayer service held the evening after the raids at a Catholic church, where an elderly Jewish Holocaust survivor compared the New Haven raids to her family's experiences.

At the age of 6, the woman had watched as her father was taken away by armed government authorities, never to return, Lowell said. Though the situations were not totally parallel, Lowell said the woman compared her psychological trauma to what some of the New Haven families experienced and decried the racial profiling the two experiences seemed to have in common.

In one of many statements marking the anniversary, Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the U.S. bishops' migration committee, also remarked on the compassionate response of the Postville community.

The town's three churches and one synagogue have worked closely together to provide ongoing support to families affected by the raids. That underscores "the humanitarian costs of workplace immigration raids as well as the need for reform of our nation's immigration policies," he said.

While the Catholic bishops understand the need to enforce the law, "we strongly believe, however, that work-site enforcement raids do not solve the challenge of illegal immigration," said Bishop Wester.

"Instead, they lead to the separation of U.S. families and the destruction of immigrant communities. The result of the Postville raid was family separation, immense suffering,

denial of due process rights and community division," he said.

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