

COURIER 05/11/2008

Activists worried about immigration raid in Waterloo

WATERLOO (AP) -- Immigration rights activists are concerned that the federal government may be planning an immigration raid on workers in Waterloo similar to one carried out in Marshalltown in 2006.

Several activists gathered Sunday at a Waterloo church and at the home of a local social worker to discuss what they consider to be an impending raid.

Discussions were prompted by an announcement last week that federal officials have leased the National Cattle Congress fairgrounds in Waterloo.

Immigration activists say they fear the fairgrounds is being prepared as a detention center.

Federal officials have refused to comment on whether they're planning an immigration raid.

The government said earlier this month that it leased the cattle congress grounds for a training exercise.

The federal government's lease is approved through May 25.

Doug Miller, general manager of the fairgrounds, said he was not allowed to release many details, but notes that contractors have installed massive generators next to many of the buildings and covered up many of the windows. A number of trailers have also been set up at the site over several weeks.

The activists meeting Sunday discussed strategies for caring for children and identifying detainees after a raid.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement "is not saying anything, and sending the stress level here high," said Sol Varisco-Santini of Catholic Charities in Des Moines.

The information session held at the Queen of Peace Catholic Church after a noon mass in Spanish, included several handouts that detail what people should do when confronted by police, and provided contact information for immigration attorneys in Iowa.

"It's all we can do," Varisco said. "We can't avoid this."

In December 2006, ICE conducted an immigration raid at the Swift & Co. meatpacking plant in Marshalltown.

Several workers were taken to Camp Dodge in Johnston and held in military barracks.

About 1,280 Swift workers were arrested in Iowa and five other states in the biggest crackdown in history on immigration violations at one company.

Tyson Foods Inc. owns a meatpacking plant in Waterloo.