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UPDATE: Immigration raid termed largest in Iowa history

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WATERLOO - Immigration officials raided the Agriprocessors Inc. meat processing plant in Postville today, arresting as many as 300 people.

Agents with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement entered the plant at about 10 a.m. looking for evidence of identity theft, use of stolen Social Security numbers and for people who are in the country illegally, said Tim Counts, an ICE spokesman.

The raid by agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was the largest such operation in Iowa history, said Matt M. Dummermuth, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Iowa.

Dummermuth said the raid at the Agriprocessors Inc. plant came after months of planning. Agriprocessors is the world's largest kosher meatpacking plant.

The detainees were being taken to the National Cattle Congress grounds in Waterloo, according to Barbara Gonzalez, and ICE spokeswoman, where agents had set up a an "intake center."

Male detainees will be held there until at least Thursday. Female detainees were to be housed in local jails.

An ICE spokeswoman said about 300 people were detained, but 40 were quickly released for "humanitarian reasons," possibly so they could care for their children.

Immigration proceedings are still pending against those people, officials said.

All the people taken into custody would be interviewed by ICE agents and public health officers to find out if they have health, caregiver or humanitarian concerns, according to a release from the U.S. Justice Department.

Those arrested will face criminal and civil charges including identity theft, improper use of Social Security data and other crimes.

"ICE is committed to enforcing the nation's immigration laws in the workplace to maintain the integrity of the immigration system," said Claude Arnold, special agent in charge of the ICE Office of Investigations based in Bloomington, Minn., in the release.

Arnold is in charge of Monday's raid.

About 1,000 to 1,050 people work at the plant, according to Iowa Workforce Development.

Sholom Rubashkin, Agriprocessors vice president, declined to release any information about the raid.

"Right now there is no comment," Rubashkin said.

The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Iowa will be temporarily relocated to Waterloo in anticipation of the arrests, according to a release from the court.

Chief Judge Linda Reade made the decision to make it easier for the families of those arrested and because of the scope of the operation, the release said. Courtrooms in Cedar Rapids and Sioux City weren't big enough to hold and process those arrested. The move will have a substantial effect on court operations in the Northern District.

Jeff Giertz, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Waterloo, said ICE officials notified Braley's office about a half hour after the raid had started.

ICE described the raid as a "targeted enforcement action," Giertz said.

"Basically they explained it they'd been investigating whatever violations in advance and they were looking for specific people," he said.

Giertz said his office was told as many as 600 to 700 people could be detained. It was unclear if that many people would be arrested or merely detained until authorities could confirm their identities.

ICE officials also told Braley's office that the National Cattle Congress would be used a processing center.

A flurry of activity has been taking place on the cattle congress grounds in Waterloo since the raid. At 12:25 p.m., a Homeland Security helicopter landed on the NCC grounds. Buses were on the grounds of Agriprocessors and NCC.

Federal officials earlier this month set up dozens of trailers, generators and other equipment at the grounds, sparking fears in Waterloo and Northeast Iowa an immigration raid was in the works. NCC officials said last week they were told the space was rented for a training exercise.

A toll-free hotline was set up by ICE for family and friends of those arrested at 1 (866) 341-3858.

Sister Mary McCauley, a Roman Catholic nun at St. Bridget's Catholic Church in Postville, told The Associated Press family members of plant workers were coming to the nearby church in tears.

"The people right now are hearing and seeing the helicopters," McCauley said. "They are just panic-stricken and very frightened and some of them are coming to the church as a safe haven."

The church is about five blocks from the plant, she said.

She said rumors began swirling around the community on Friday about an upcoming raid, leaving many people worried.

She said immigration officials arrived today with buses, vans and two helicopters.

She said she went to the plant to help provide information and assist workers but was not allowed to get

close.

"Some of the people that are going to be detained are up against a fence and now they're tying their hands," she said.

Many of the plant workers are Hispanic, mostly from Mexico and Guatemala, she said.

Agriprocessors is the world's largest kosher meatpacking plant.

In Waterloo, school administrators said they have yet to see any backlash from the Monday morning raids in Postville. No widespread absences had been reported.

However, administrators, who are attending a meeting in Des Moines today and Tuesday, are keeping close tabs on the situation and preparing for any possible impact on students and their families.

"We have heard the rumors and received information about the raid in Postville. We are always cognizant how it could affect our families. Our job is to help children cope and deal with difficult situations," said Sharon Miller, director of schools and community relations. "With any student who is facing a major concern we want to be there to provide support because what affects families affects our children and our schools."

On Sunday, an immigrant rights workshop - put on in response to fears of a possible raid - drew several hundred people at Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Waterloo.

Hilda, who declined to give her full name because she fears deportation, lives in Waterloo with her 6-year-old daughter and husband, Enfrain, who works in construction. The family said they stayed after Mass for the meeting because they weren't sure what to do if authorities came to their home or work to arrest them.

"We wanted to be prepared," Hilda said in Spanish. "We wanted to find out what to do if they detain us."

El Centro Latinoamericano, a resource center in Waterloo, hastily organized the event after being flooded with calls about rumors of an immigration raid.

The unrest started early last week after news spread federal officials, including some from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, had set up a temporary base at the National Cattle Congress.

Local leaders and several immigrant rights organizations from Des Moines put on the presentation, which outlined the constitutional rights of every person, regardless of legal status.

They handed out a detailed, wide-ranging survey that asked questions about who should take custody of children in case of arrest and if they desire legal assistance. Advocates also handed out power of attorney packets.

People also received a "Rights Card" to hand to authorities in case of arrest. It states card-holder chooses to exercise their right to remain silent, and lists a contact number of an organization or attorney of their choosing.

Sol Varisco-Santini, program coordinator for Des Moines-based Catholic Charities, helped lead the

workshop. She said the organized effort draws on lessons learned from a 2006 raid on a Swift meat processing plant in Marshalltown.

By collecting lots of information from people and informing them of their rights, immigrant advocates hope to avoid some of the human rights violations they believe occurred during the Marshalltown raids. During the raid, Varisco-Santini said, reports of detainees not receiving food or water were not unusual.

"(Illegal immigrants) do have their rights, and a lot of people don't know that," she said. "There's a lot of panic, and we wanted to help calm them."

Feelings of unease have spread beyond Latino communities in Northeast Iowa. Varisco-Santini said Hispanics in Des Moines have also expressed fear, particularly because federal officials have been so tight-lipped about their intentions at NCC. Immigrant advocates from as far away as California are also monitoring the situation through list-servs and online news reports.

Carole Gustafson, a board member at El Centro Latinoamericano, said the meeting was crucial because immigrants raised in other countries often come from a culture in which authority figures are never questioned.

"In their country, you don't argue with authority figures. You don't have rights," she said. "So if a boss says, all the Latinos come with me ... it's kind of like leading sheep to slaughter. That's what was so important about today."

ICE has set up a toll-free number for family members to find out that family members can call to find out the status of those detained, and detention locations. That number is (866) 341-3858.