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State steps in to help Postville residents

By Charlotte Eby, Courier Des Moines Bureau

DES MOINES --- State officials are working to help Postville residents deal with the fallout of a raid by federal immigration officials Monday on kosher meatpacker Agriprocessors Inc.

The raid netted close to 300 detainees and is being called the biggest federal raid of its kind in Iowa.

Iowa Lt. Gov. Patty Judge said she hears concerns about the future of the plant and its jobs and said leaders would aim to get those questions answered.

"We know that there's a lot of anxiety," said Judge, who is heading a working group of top state officials reacting to the raid. They had not yet talked to the owners of the plant Tuesday morning, Judge said.

Postville families who are in the country lawfully also will be affected, Judge said.

"There are many people that are employed there that are longtime residents of Postville, and so it is going to be difficult for them to pick up the pieces if the plant is dark for very long," Judge said.

Judge was optimistic the small Northeast Iowa town, which has served as a draw for residents of diverse backgrounds, could rebound.

"Postville always found a way to sort of make things work, and I'm sure that that resilience will be there, and they will do that again," Judge said.

Because federal officials are leading the effort, the state is playing a support role to ensure residents in Postville have the things they need, Judge said.

One of those roles is ensuring children are safe.

Judge said reports found that all of the children of affected families had been housed with relatives or friends. No children needed to be taken into foster care, which Judge called "a real relief."

"That was something we didn't want to do, but we knew that we would have to if necessary," Judge said.

Iowa Department of Human Services spokesman Roger Munns said federal officials notified them by faxed letter when the raid was in progress.

In Postville, every child was matched with an adult caretaker and the DHS was not asked to assist.

"We were not called to protect a child," Munns said.

If they are called in, the department will determine first if the child has a caretaker, and if not, if a family member can step forward. If no family members can help, the child would be placed in a foster home.

An earlier raid on a meatpacking plant in Marshalltown resulted in no children ending up in foster care, Munns said.