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Feds raid Marshalltown plant; busloads of workers arrested

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Federal immigration agents raided Swift & Co. meatpacking plants in Iowa and five other states today in an investigation of an extensive identify theft scheme.

Federal officials said the agents arrested an undisclosed number of workers at the facilities.

Swift's plant in Marshalltown employs about 2,200 workers.

Six buses had been brought in to take the detainees away, said Marcelina Cenicerros of Muscatine. She was standing at the gate of the Marshalltown plant while documents were checked inside the plant.

Three buses had been loaded and left the plant, she said.

The Department of Homeland Security issued a statement saying that "large numbers of illegal aliens" may have used the Social Security numbers of U.S. citizens and legal residents to get jobs at the Swift plants.

The statement said Immigration and Customs Enforcement investigators have identified "hundreds of potential victims" of the scheme. The number of arrests at the Swift operations will be released Wednesday, officials said.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement will release more information Wednesday, but a telephone number is available for family members trying to get information about loved ones today: 1-866-341-3858. Spanish-speaking government employees are available to help.

Carmen Montealegre of the Hispanic ministry at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Marshalltown pointed out that today is Our Lady of Guadalupe Day, a major festival for Mexican people.

A special mass with singing and dancing was scheduled to be held at the church at 6 p.m., Montealegre said.

She said she didn't know if the celebration would be held because of the action at the plant.

"It's really sad," Montealegre said of the detained workers. "Nobody can help them now."

Federal agents arrived at the Swift plant in Marshalltown with a search warrant about 8 a.m. CST.

Swift said the six plants operate all of the company's beef processing and 77 percent of its pork business.

"Any loss of a significant number of employees at any facility could adversely affect the operations of that facility until Swift is able to replace any lost members of its workforce and return to normal production levels," the company said in a statement.

In addition to Marshalltown, the other plants shut down are at Cactus, Texas; Grand Island, Neb.; Greeley, Colo.; Hyrum, Utah; and Worthington, Minn. A pork processing plant at Louisville, Ky., was not affected.

Swift alleged that the enforcement action violated the company's agreement to participate in a worker authorization program.

"Swift has never condoned the employment of unauthorized workers, nor have we ever knowingly hired such individuals," said Sam Rovit, Swift's chief executive.

Marshalltown Assistant Police Chief Darrell Templeton said the federal agency gave the police department a courtesy call indicating they would be at the plant today but they did not go into detail.

Templeton said he did not know the purpose of the action but said he understands similar operations were underway elsewhere in the country today.

"We are not involved," he said.