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Officials won't say if detainees are at Camp Dodge

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The Iowa National Guard Base at Camp Dodge in Johnston is apparently being used as a detention facility for some of the 1,282 immigrants taken into custody Tuesday in a sweep of meat-packing plants.

Families from Nebraska camped out this afternoon at Johnston Commons, near Northwest 70th Avenue, hoping to make contact with relatives who were arrested at the Swift & Company packing plant in Grand Island and more than a dozen U.S. Homeland Security buses that transported workers could be seen on the grounds of Camp Dodge.

But state and federal officials declined today to confirm the whereabouts of any arrested workers.

Tim Counts, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokesman in St. Paul, Minn., said the detainees are being held in a number of facilities in the Midwest. He said one reason the locations are not being disclosed is that county sheriffs have asked that the detention sites be kept secret because of concerns that TV stations will send camera crews to the locations.

"Why bother confirming where the sites are if the media are not going to be allowed access anyway?" Counts said.

When asked whether Camp Dodge was being used as a detention facility, Lt. Col. Gregory Hapgood Jr., public affairs officer for the Iowa National Guard, said: "I can't confirm or deny that at this point."

Hapgood added, though, that he had seen activity at the Johnston military base by people with jackets that read "POLICE" and "ICE" on the backs. ICE is an acronym for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which conducted Tuesday's raids.

"All that I know is what I have seen with my own eyes, and that is that there is some activity at Camp Dodge, but other than that, I don't know who it is," Hapgood said.

The refusal of Immigration and Customs Enforcement to identify where the detainees are being held is contrary to normal policies of federal and state agencies, which routinely identify prisons where inmates are in custody.

"This is just temporary during the processing period," said Carl Rusnok, a public affairs officer for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Texas. "That information will be available in the near future. I don't have a specific time frame.

"We made 1,282 arrests yesterday, and the processing of so many people can take awhile," Rusnok said.

"We are talking about getting as much information as possible, and in a number of cases, we are having to speak Spanish. We are using a Spanish translator, or whatever, and that is taking a long time."

Nebraska residents and several Des Moines-area lawyers and clergy said they had been turned away at the camp dates by authorities after learning from a federal hotline that detainees from Nebraska had been transported to Camp Dodge.

Neither family nor lawyers said they were given any indication if or when they would be able to talk to detainees.

Rusnok said workers who were arrested can speak with their lawyers, but only if they have proper paperwork. Some lawyers for immigrants have said they want to talk with their clients, but they have barred from Camp Dodge because their clients have not signed a government-approved form.

"I can just tell you that as far as ICE policy is concerned, it can be a real problem when you have a person saying that they have a client and then another person says that they have a client. You can end up with 10 people saying that they are the attorney for that person," Rusnok said.

Telephones are being made available at all places where the detainees are held, Counts said, and workers arrested are being allowed to place calls. The detainees may call anyone they choose, he added.

The Camp Dodge base has modern facilities that can be used to house and feed more than 2,000 male and female soldiers. The installation has been used as a starting point for thousands of Iowa citizen-soldiers who have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan over the past few years.