

Published December 16, 2006

Stop 'aggressive' raids, advocates plead

Charges: U.S. ignores detained immigrants' rights, some allege. Hispanics scarce in Marshalltown

By LEE ROOD
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

Frustration over the uncertainty surrounding Swift & Co. workers arrested this week and anxiety about what will become of their children led to an outcry Friday for state leaders to step in and for Congress to force federal immigration officials to change their procedures in such raids.

Government leaders said, however, that although some actions of federal agents during and after the raid Tuesday at the Marshalltown meatpacking plant were questionable, immigration agents' handling of such enforcement actions is unlikely to change unless Congress intervenes.

Meanwhile, shock waves continued to roll through Iowa on Friday:

- There were signs in Marshalltown that many Hispanics not arrested in the crackdown were leaving the community. Hispanics made up 13 percent of the city's population of 26,000 when the 2000 census was taken.
- An official of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an agency known as ICE, refused to release information on the whereabouts of each of the 90 people arrested in Marshalltown or about 410 detainees from Minnesota and Nebraska who were all held at Camp Dodge, north of Des Moines, after their arrests.
- Lawyers and advocates for immigrants accused ICE of violating its own regulations in the way it has treated the detainees.

The arrests Tuesday of 1,282 workers at Swift meatpacking plants in Marshalltown and five other cities on immigration and identity-theft charges represented the biggest crackdown in history on immigration violations at one company, the government has said.

Within 72 hours of the arrests, the workers were deported or transported by bus or airplane to federal detention centers in other states.

Marc Raimondi, an ICE spokesman in Washington, refused to release information on the whereabouts of each of the Iowa detainees. Most were believed to have either been deported to Mexico or to a federal detention facility outside Atlanta, Ga.

On Friday, lawyers and advocates for the immigrant workers appealed for more help from state leaders following widespread complaints of violations of the workers' due-process rights.

Ta Yu Yang, a Des Moines immigration lawyer who represents at least 15 of the Swift workers who were held at Camp Dodge, said the government should return the workers from Atlanta so they can have access to legal representation and their families while awaiting federal hearings.

If the government refuses to return the workers, the cost of representing those who are fighting deportation will be huge, Yang predicted.

He said the federal government has access to detention space nearby in Iowa, including county jails in Cedar Rapids and Council Bluffs.

Yang said that his 15 clients were all denied their due-process rights and that none had received charging documents that outlined the offenses he or she was accused of committing. This is required by ICE's own regulations, he said.

Yang also said he was worried about six other clients who were supposed to have been held at Camp Dodge following their arrests. They were not listed on federal records, either under their real names or their

assumed names.

Raimondi, the ICE spokesman, said the agency is committed to the due process of "every single alien in our custody." When asked why the men and women were moved to Georgia, rather than being held in the Midwest, Raimondi said, "We have very high standards for detention facilities. ... What it comes down to is we place detainees where we have room."

When asked whether ICE had closer facilities available in Iowa, he replied: "I don't know. ... Number one, we're committed to the due process of every single alien in our custody. Number two, we have very high detention standards. Number three, we place our detainees where we have room."

While lawyers and advocates were trying to help workers' families, there were signs around Marshalltown on Friday of another exodus of immigrant residents - one of the residents' own choosing.

Twenty people got aboard a bus for Nuevo Laredo, a Mexican border town, at 4:30 p.m. Many of the travelers told a reporter they would only be gone a few weeks or a month to visit relatives.

But Geraldo Maldonado of Des Moines, who was helping the bus driver, said he had heard differently. "A lot of these people are leaving for good because of the immigration raids," he said.

La Estancia, a popular Marshalltown restaurant, had just one diner at 5:30 p.m. Waitress Yolanda Gonzalez said the 40-seat restaurant would typically be full at that time.

Elsewhere, rumors swirled Friday that more raids are coming and that additional arrests had occurred in Nebraska and Iowa. Those rumors apparently were false.

"Things are so tense here," said Marco Adasme, who heads the New Iowans Center in Muscatine, which provides job assistance and other services to legal immigrants.

"The ripple effect is being felt everywhere, and tension is growing," he said.

Advocacy groups were working Friday to help parents being held in Georgia choose guardians for their children in anticipation of deportation or long legal battles.

Elizabeth Barnhill, executive director of the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and Laurie Schipper, executive director Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence, sent an e-mail to other advocacy groups nationally about problems growing out of the Marshalltown raid. "There are many awful stories emerging, particularly in regard to the children: a house of 35 children without parents and community members attempting to care for them; a priest trying to find a breast-feeding mother whose infant won't eat and being denied access; the same priest trying to find a father of an asthmatic child to get information about the child's care and again being denied access," they wrote.

Yang, the Des Moines immigration lawyer, said Gov. Tom Vilsack and other leaders should urge Congress to put a moratorium on such "aggressive" raids until Congress can offer more thoughtful guidance on immigration.

Matt Paul, a spokesman for the governor, said Vilsack's primary focus this week was to deal with the needs of people in Marshalltown, the neighbors and families affected by the raid. "The governor feels that until the federal government solves this with a straightforward and new immigration policy, we need to respect the law, but we need to do it in a coordinated and prepared manner," Paul said.

This article includes reporting by Register staff writers Philip Brasher, Jennifer Jacobs and Jerry Perkins.