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Town's economy is hit hard after immigration raid

By Mark Pattison Catholic News Service

POSTVILLE, Iowa (CNS) -- When Father Paul Ouderkirk assumed the pastorate of St. Bridget Parish in Postville in 2000, he estimated the town's population at 2,000. Within a year, he said, it had grown to 2,500.

But Postville -- whose motto is "Hometown to the World" -- has gone into economic decline since the raid on May 12, 2008, at the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant.

In the raid, 389 were arrested -- equal to about 15 percent of Postville's population -- and that was just the day shift. More than 300 of them were slapped with federal charges of immigration-related crimes or identity theft.

Many of those people have been deported to their native countries, principally Mexico and Guatemala.

Subsequent revelations about plant conditions and worker mistreatment plunged Agriprocessors into a downward spiral from which it could not recover. Even though it recruited immigrants, presumably properly documented, from other nations to take the place of the Hispanics arrested in the raid, the plant shut down Nov. 14.

"Agriprocessors was going down, but nobody knew it at the time," said Mary Klauke, rural life and community development director for the Archdiocese of Dubuque. "The raid just accelerated things."

The deportations of undocumented workers following the raid helped depopulate the town. Those arrested, but who have not yet completed the judicial process, are not allowed to work. The plant closing threw most of the rest of Postville's immigrant population out of work.

The wages that would have been spent in the community are no more. A downtown Postville bakery and cafe catering to the town's Hispanics closed for lack of business and a for-lease sign is in the window. A Latin market with first Communion dresses, and dolls wearing their own first Communion dresses, next door to the bakery, is closed. The weekly newspaper is for sale. A once-bustling restaurant filled some of its now-empty spaces with foosball and pool tables.

In some respects, the only growth industry in town is in social services.

The Postville Resource Center aids residents struggling to make ends meet and now has two volunteers from AmeriCorps to help handle the caseload.

The town's food pantry, designed to help 30 people once a week, is now distributing food twice a week to twice as many people. People arrive as early as 9 a.m. to wait for a number

to be handed out at noon. It's not until 2 p.m. that the numbers are called out, four at a time.

Contrary to what one might expect, a sizable majority of those waiting to go to the food pantry are not Hispanic. Some need help to walk. Others bring their children, including newborns. Many talk about the hurdles to landing a job in a suddenly sour economy.

But Father Ouderkirk, who retired in 2004 but returned to Postville to help after the 2008 raid, traces the town's economic decline to the fire in late 2003 that destroyed a turkey processing plant in the town. Before then, the turkey plant and Agriprocessors competed for high-quality workers.

Afterward, with Agriprocessors the only large employer left in town, Agriprocessors held its work force in less regard, according to Father Ouderkirk, who said the message to employees was "You want to quit? Fine. There are 15 people behind the gate waiting to take your job."

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