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Area Hispanics scurry to get paperwork in line

By EMILY CHRISTENSEN, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO - With a raid by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials seeming almost inevitable many Hispanics in the Cedar Valley spent Monday getting their paperwork in order.

Every chair inside the small waiting room at El Centro Latinoamericano was filled and more people crowded the hallway waiting to see a case worker. But it wasn't just work permits and Social Security cards they were worried about.

One man, who asked not to be identified, said he was waiting with family members who were in the country legally on a work permit but were worried what would happen to their special needs daughter should they be arrested and detained.

Mario Basurto, project coordinator for El Centro Latinoamericano, said that story was representative of many of the inquiries case workers had been fielding for a few weeks.

"Normally we see about 20 clients a day. We are averaging about 20 an hour," Basurto said. "And we are getting about 50 or 60 calls. A lot of people are even scared to come to our office."

He said that even those living legally in the United States are seeking their office's support because they can also be detained for several days before their paperwork is documented.

Beverly Ayala, who owns La Chiquita in downtown Waterloo with her husband, said she has been answering similar questions at her store.

"It's been kind of quiet today, but Mondays are always slow because the restaurant is closed," she said between phone calls. "My phone has been ringing off the wall. Latinos, non-Latinos. They are all calling and concerned."

Ayala has also helped several Latinos draw up power of attorney papers, which she is also able to notarize. She said those requests began pouring in following similar raids on the Swift meat processing plant in Marshalltown in 2006.

"If they are arrested they could be gone for days or weeks or months. They need to know there is someone there to take care of their kids while they are in jail," she said. "And if they are deported, they need someone to have guardianship over their children so they can get them a passport and get the kids back to Mexico with their parents."

Basurto said the fear stretched far beyond the Cedar Valley, especially once word of the raid in Postville began to spread. He said people had called asking questions from as far away as Des Moines and Nebraska.

The agency and the Ayalas are also working with other legal immigrants to inform all Latinos they have

certain rights while in custody. Ayala printed up copies of the Miranda Rights in Spanish to pass out among her customers and their families and friends.

"They need to understand that even if they are here illegally there are certain rights they have," she said.

Ayala said the fear has yet to affect her business, which she said now attracts a very diverse clientele. However, she does expect places like Agriprocessors in Postville to have to cut back or even shut down their plant given the number of workers taken into custody today.

"This is going to affect the cost of their business which will in turn affect the cost of the products they are selling and will impact the economy," she said.