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ICE raid is largest ever in Iowa

By JEFF REINITZ and JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, Courier Staff Writers

WATERLOO - It all happened so quickly, yet many believed all along that what federal officials were doing at National Cattle Congress for the past week was preparing for exactly what took place.

As the sun rose Monday morning, a flurry of activity at the National Cattle Congress grounds led to what officials are calling the largest immigration raid in Iowa history.

Federal agents converged on the grounds of the Agriprocessors meat-packing plant in Postville at 10 a. m., rounding up Hispanics on investigations of identity theft, use of stolen Social Security cards and for people in the county illegally. As many as 300 people were arrested, although some were later released.

Workers for El Centro Latinoamericano in Postville said dozens of people slept overnight at St. Bridget Catholic Church, which became a gathering point for families of those arrested, as well as a handful who were conditionally released until a court hearing. They also reported that federal officers dropped off at the church at least one minor who was arrested in the raid.

Authorities weren't just looking for illegal workers. Immigration agents sought to seize Agriprocessors' computer system including CDs and other data storage devices, according to the records ICE officials filed in applying for a search warrant of the plant. Agents were also looking for data from "biometric" devices that allowed workers to clock in and out by scanning their hands.

ICE officials said they should have most or all of the detainees relocated from the fairgrounds by late Wednesday or Thursday.

"Our priority is to ensure the safety and security of everyone involved," ICE spokeswoman Barbara Gonzalez told reporters at a staging area near the Electric Park Ballroom Monday afternoon.

Gonzalez said the NCC would be used by ICE as an "intake center," where those arrested would have their photographs and fingerprints taken and get put into a database. From there, the men would be housed in NCC's Estel Hall while the women would be housed temporarily in "local jails." She would not specify which jails would take in the women.

Gonzalez said everyone's rights were being protected.

"We do have medical centers ... shower facilities, recreational facilities, three meals a day, snacks," she said. "We felt (the National Cattle Congress) was an adequate facility to house them for their safety and security."

The National Cattle Congress grounds in Waterloo was rented by federal officials for the entire month of May.

When the feds closed off the NCC grounds May 3, there was little word on what their work there was to

entail. Many thought they were participating in Homeland Security drill to prepare for a natural or other disaster. But others, including area Hispanics, believed that an immigration raid was imminent.

The raid by agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was the largest such operation in Iowa history, said Matt M. Dummermuth, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Iowa.

He said the raid at the Agriprocessors Inc. plant was part of an investigation that started in October and came after months of planning. Agriprocessors is the world's largest kosher meatpacking plant.

In addition to detaining workers, ICE agents sought to seize Agriprocessors' computer systems and CDs for forensic analysis, according to court records. They also looked for identification documents and data "biometric" devices the workers use to clock in and out. Such information could be evidence of harboring aliens, records state.

The detainees were being taken to the National Cattle Congress grounds according to Barbara Gonzalez and ICE spokeswoman, where agents had set up a an "intake center."

Male detainees will be held there until at least Thursday. Female detainees were to be housed in local jails.

About 300 people were detained, but at least 44 were quickly released for "humanitarian reasons," mainly so they could care for their children, said Claude Arnold, special agent in charge of the ICE office of investigation in Bloomington, Minn. They were released on the condition they appear before an administrative judge at a later date, Arnold said.

Immigration proceedings are still pending against those people, officials said.

"ICE is committed to enforcing the nation's immigration laws in the workplace to maintain the integrity of the immigration system," Arnold said in a press release. "We carry out that obligation in a fair and responsible manner, ensuring humanitarian needs are taken into consideration."

Court records allege immigration officials have criminal complaints on file for 695 people in connection with the investigation.

All those taken into custody would be interviewed by ICE agents and public health officers to find out if they have health, caregiver or humanitarian concerns, according to a release from the U.S. Justice Department.

Those arrested will face criminal and civil charges including identity theft, improper use of Social Security data and other crimes.

About 1,000 to 1,050 people work at the plant, according to Iowa Workforce Development.

Sholom Rubashkin, Agriprocessors vice president, declined to release any information about the raid.

"Right now there is no comment," Rubashkin said.

The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Iowa will be temporarily relocated to the Electric Park Ballroom on the NCC grounds in anticipation of the arrests, according to a release from the court.

Chief Judge Linda Reade made the decision to make it easier for the families of those arrested and because of the scope of the operation, the release said. Courtrooms in Cedar Rapids and Sioux City weren't big enough to hold and process those arrested. The move will have a substantial effect on court operations in the Northern District.

Jeff Giertz, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Waterloo, said ICE officials notified Braley's office about a half hour after the raid started.

ICE described the raid as a "targeted enforcement action," Giertz said.

"Basically they explained it they'd been investigating whatever violations in advance and they were looking for specific people," he said.

ICE agents and medical professionals are evaluating those detained, Counts said.

Those in need of medical care could be conditionally released, while awaiting appearance in immigration court.

A toll-free hotline was set up by ICE for family and friends of those arrested at 1 (866) 341-3858.

In Waterloo, school administrators said they have yet to see any backlash from the Monday morning raids in Postville. No widespread absences had been reported.

However, administrators, who are attending a meeting in Des Moines today, are keeping close tabs on the situation and preparing for any possible impact on students and their families.

"We have heard the rumors and received information about the raid in Postville. We are always cognizant how it could affect our families. Our job is to help children cope and deal with difficult situations," said Sharon Miller, director of schools and community relations. "With any student who is facing a major concern we want to be there to provide support because what affects families affects our children and our schools."

Contributing to this story was Staff Writer Amie Steffen.