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In Postville, shock but no surprise

JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, Courier Staff Writer

POSTVILLE - No one was surprised this happened.

Workers at Agriprocessors had heard rumors of an impending immigration raid for weeks.

A few weeks ago workers were asked to produce papers proving they were in the country legally, said one man.

"In a way it's good. In a way it's not. Obviously it's going to hurt the economy. It's a big plant," said Jarrod Hauk, 22, of Waukon. Hauk drives shipping trailers for Agriprocessors.

Mark Forbes of Postville, a maintenance support supervisor, was sent home early Monday, but returned to the site to see what was happening.

"I don't think it's right the way they came busting in. They took every Hispanic person out in cuffs until they're proved to be a U.S. citizen."

At St. Bridget Catholic Church, where a Hispanic ministry serves many families with workers at the plant, about 70 people gathered.

A Guatemalan woman who identified herself only as Ana burst into tears upon receiving a voice mail from her husband saying he had been detained.

"He said to take care of myself," Ana said in Spanish.

Ana doesn't know what she'll do next. Except for her husband, she's alone in this country. She has three children in Guatemala. The majority of the Hispanics who work at the plant are from Guatemala. Ana said she came here to give her children a better life, to spare them from the poverty she grew up with. She can't return because she has to support her children and repay debts.

"I don't want them to have to come to this country," she said in a quaking voice, on the verge of tears. "There's no greater pain than splitting up your family."

As she spoke, her cell phone rang constantly with calls from worried friends and relatives, some from Guatemala.

Asked for her reaction, Sister Mary McCauley of St. Bridget said:

"Look at the pain on their faces. The pain is palpable."

Paul Rael, a lay minister at the church, tried to calm the fears of those gathered there. He said unlike in Marshalltown, where about 90 Swift workers were detained in December 2006, authorities assured him

parents won't be separated from their children. Several of the Marshalltown detainees were taken to Camp Dodge in Johnston and held in military barracks.

"This is the only assurance I can give you right now," Rael said.

The Postville detainees were being taken to the National Cattle Congress grounds in Waterloo, according to ICE officials, where federal agents set up a makeshift processing center.

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

An ICE spokeswoman said about 300 people were detained, but 40 were quickly released for "humanitarian reasons," possibly so they could care for their children.

In the Marshalltown raid, a total of about 1,280 Swift workers were arrested in six states in the biggest crackdown in history on immigration violations at one company.