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Braley calls for Agriprocessors investigation; staff tours NCC detention area

JOSH NELSON, Courier Staff Writer

POSTVILLE - Some public officials are beginning to question Agriprocessors' commitment to the nation's immigration laws after more than a third of its workforce was arrested during a raid Monday.

U.S. Congressman Bruce Braley, D-Waterloo, wrote a letter to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which conducted Monday's raids, urging them to "fully investigate" Agriprocessors for possible immigration law violations. The raid netted 390 arrests, or about 40 percent of the work force.

"This figure alone raises questions about Agriprocessors' commitment to making sure they have a legal workforce," Braley wrote.

Braley said there needs to be a greater emphasis on punishing employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants as a way to curb the immigration problem.

In 2004, just three employers were fined for breaking those laws. Four years later - after the Bush administration announced employer enforcement would be a priority - 92 employers were arrested and 17 fined, Braley said.

Members of Braley staff toured the National Cattle Congress grounds, where the 390 detainees are being held, Wednesday.

Jeff Giertz, a Braley spokesman, said the issue is on everyone's minds right now.

"There's a lot of information going around, and with information comes rumor and all fo that stuff," Giertz said. "It's tough figuring out what's out there, what's not out there."

Representatives from Sens. Tom Harkin and Charles Grassley were also on the tour. Giertz said officials were interested in seeing the facility "for purposes of transparency."

Giertz said the group was not able to speak to any of the detainees, but he said they were able to see how the intake process functioned.

"I think there's no question that the federal agencies there are running a professional operation," he said.

The NCC fairgrounds are being used until federal officials determine whether to file criminal charges. Those who are charged will be turned over to the U.S. Marshals. Those who aren't charged will remain in ICE custody and transported to an area immigration detention facility for removal proceedings.

Giertz said ICE officials declined to comment on whether Agriprocessors would be facing any charges.

Agriprocessors put out a statement Tuesday stating it was cooperating with ICE officials and other government agencies.

"Our company takes the immigration laws seriously," the statement said. "We cooperated with the government in the enforcement action. We intend to continue to cooperate with the government in its investigation."

Company officials also said they plan on investigating the incident. They also extended their sympathies to families who were affected by the raid.