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Rights workshop held amid immigration raid fears

JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO - An immigrant rights workshop - put on in response to fears of a possible raid - drew several hundred people Sunday at Queen of Peace Catholic Church.

Hilda, who declined to give her full name because she fears deportation, lives in Waterloo with her 6-year-old daughter and husband, Enfrain, who works in construction. The family said they stayed after Mass for the meeting because they weren't sure what to do if authorities came to their home or work to arrest them.

"We wanted to be prepared," Hilda said in Spanish. "We wanted to find out what to do if they detain us."

El Centro Latinoamericano, a resource center in Waterloo, hastily organized the event after being flooded with calls about rumors of an immigration raid.

The unrest started early last week after news spread federal officials, including some from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, had set up a temporary base at the National Cattle Congress.

An ICE spokesman on Sunday declined to explain why the agency has set up dozens of trailers, generators and other equipment at the grounds. NCC officials said last week they were told the space was rented for a training exercise.

Local leaders and several immigrant rights organizations from Des Moines put on the presentation, which outlined the constitutional rights of every person, regardless of legal status.

They handed out a detailed, wide-ranging survey that asked questions about who should take custody of children in case of arrest and if they desire legal assistance. Advocates also handed out power of attorney packets.

People also received a "Rights Card" to hand to authorities in case of arrest. It states card-holder chooses to exercise their right to remain silent, and lists a contact number of an organization or attorney of the their choosing.

Sol Varisco-Santini, program coordinator for Des Moines-based Catholic Charities, helped lead the workshop. She said the organized effort draws on lessons learned from a 2006 raid on a Swift meat processing plant in Marshalltown.

By collecting lots of information from people and informing them of their rights, immigrant advocates hope to avoid some of the human rights violations they believe occurred during the Marshalltown raids. During the raid, Varisco-Santini said, reports of detainees not receiving food or water were not unusual.

"(Illegal immigrants) do have their rights, and a lot of people don't know that," she said. "There's a lot of panic, and we wanted to help calm them."

Feelings of unease have spread beyond Latino communities in Northeast Iowa. Varisco-Santini said Hispanics in Des Moines have also expressed fear, particularly because federal officials have been so tight-lipped about their intentions at NCC. Immigrant advocates from as far away as California are also monitoring the situation through list-servs and online news reports.

Carole Gustafson, a board member at El Centro Latinoamericano, said the meeting was crucial because immigrants raised in other countries often come from a culture in which authority figures are never questioned.

"In their country, you don't argue with authority figures. You don't have rights," she said. "So if a boss says, all the Latinos come with me ... it's kind of like leading sheep to slaughter. That's what was so important about today."