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EDITORIAL: Raid shows need for immigration reform

A national problem came to a head locally as federal immigration officials raided the Agriprocessors Inc. meatpacking plant in Postville Monday, and are detaining many workers at the National Cattle Congress grounds in Waterloo.

The raid has prompted cries of government bullying on one side and declarations of support for the raid on the other. Many in the middle are simply left wondering when our leaders will take the necessary steps toward overhauling our immigration policies.

When the emotional dust settles, we hope local residents can agree on a few things.

The use of false, forged or stolen Social Security numbers, or other forms of documentation enabling illegal immigrants to work has reached epidemic proportions. The ease by which illegal immigrants are able to procure fraudulent documents is startling.

That's why these types of raids are warranted. Agents with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) who have landed in the vicinity are simply doing their jobs.

However, the raids should be done with an eye toward an end result of comprehensive immigration reform. It's no secret that the nation's immigration system is dysfunctional and has been allowed to develop that way for decades.

The nation continues to have an unrealistically low quota for legal immigration. Some employers either look the other way at suspicious applications - knowing that the raids are the exception, not the rule - or cite the failures of government agencies to coordinate programs that could better identify illegal workers.

Iowa has quickly become a microcosm of the national problem.

It is estimated that in 10 years the state will face a work force shortage of 200,000 people. In 2000, then-Gov. Tom Vilsack declared that the future of Iowa's economy depended on welcoming immigrants - a realistic assessment that predictably ran into an emotional buzz saw.

Between 2000 and 2007, Iowa grew by 59,800 people. An estimated 36,491 were of Hispanic origin, or 61 percent.

The quest for work, in order to support self and family, coupled with the flawed immigration system has left many illegal immigrants open to exploitation.

In Postville, 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 that workers use to clock in and out. Such information could be evidence of harboring aliens, and perhaps paying them lower-than-legal wages.
For many citizens, the sight of alleged illegal immigrant workers being corralled onto a bus is unacceptable as long as employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants or turn a blind eye toward the process, are not also placed in handcuffs.

This year, Iowa lawmakers considered measures to try to crack down on employers who hired illegal immigrants, but failed to get a bill passed through both chambers before adjourning in April.

We will be expecting more from the next session.

Here in Iowa, there are legitimate indications we will continue to need the labor. We also need to fight the out-of-control fraud.

Nationally, it's way past time that Congress adopt comprehensive immigration reform that increases legal immigration to ensure an adequate number of workers. This will also have the effect of reducing illegal immigration and some of the associated social ills - such as false documentation and employer exploitation.