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Scared relatives huddling inside Postville church

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POSTVILLE - People sleep on the floor and in pews, and clean their bodies with wash cloths in the bathroom.

But the most serious problem at St. Bridget's Catholic Church, volunteers agree, is fear.

Not just fear of deportation, but fear of the unknown, said David Vasquez, who took time off his job as campus pastor at Luther College to be in Postville. There was no reliable information Tuesday on how to locate family members, or what people hiding in the church can expect in the coming days.

"It's hard to assure people there is due process," he said. "Here we are 36 hours after 300 people were taken away, and we don't know where they're at."

Officials said they had released nearly all the women who were staying in local jails. Men were being held at National Cattle Congress in Waterloo.

But Vasquez complained operators answering the toll-free number provided by Immigration and Customs Enforcement only confirm a person is on the list of those arrested. No location is given.

So when he gathered people in the sanctuary so they could hear via cell phone from Sonya Parra, an immigration attorney working in Waterloo, the standing room-only crowd hushed.

Vasquez held a microphone up to his cell phone, and quietly told Parra to start at the beginning. Her voice echoing from speakers overhead, she told people how many were arrested and why.

She advised people charged with illegal immigration to find an attorney and informed them people with ankle bracelets can leave Postville but not the state.

"It's very important if you don't speak English or don't read Spanish well, that someone reads the conditions of your release," she said. "The consequences of not appearing on your court date is immediate deportation."

Packed tight

Since the immigration raid at Agriprocessors on Monday, hundreds of people have been staying in crowded conditions at the church.

When a man stopped by to say the local YMCA showers were open, it was welcome news.

The smell of body odor hung in the air of the men's bathroom, where toilet paper, toothbrushes, toothpaste and clean towels are stacked in corners and ledges.
Yet when volunteers with El Centro Latinoamericano and a local church attempted to bring people to Waterloo to give them access to lawyers and consulate services, they were met with skepticism, concern and a barrage of questions: Where are our loved ones detained? Who can go see them? Can we hand off belongings to give to family members? Can I go to Waterloo if I have a tracking device on my ankle? Will I be arrested if I go?

When told they would receive only legal aid and a safe place to stay, but would not be able to see family members, most opted out.

"Then no. What's the point?" said a man in a black leather jacket.

In the end, only a handful made the trip to Waterloo. El Centro had room for 25.

Labor squabble

An attorney who said he was representing the owners of Agriprocessors arrived Tuesday afternoon and answered questions from dozens of people in the church yard.

Jacob Monty, of Houston-based Monty Partners, said he was there to represent former workers from the plant. He voiced concern over the presence of representatives of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union.

He alleged the UFCW has used the raid as an organizing tool by promising arrested workers an immigration lawyer if they join.

"If immigration laws are broken, it's not really an issue the company or the union can help you with. But we have seen the UFCW, in particular, use that tactic to try to organize workers," he said.

A man wearing a UFCW, Region 6, shirt referred all question to a union spokeswoman.