Postville raid recalled at immigration reform rally
CEDAR RAPIDS (AP) – Recalling the devastating consequences suffered by workers and families affected by a 2008 immigration raid at a kosher slaughterhouse in Iowa, immigrants marked today's five-year anniversary Friday by calling for reforms to prevent similar, wide-scale deportations in the future.

Workers and relatives impacted by the May 12, 2008 raid at the Agriprocessors plant in Postville joined with church leaders and advocates for a somber rally and prayer service in Cedar Rapids. They said they wanted to use the tragedy of the raid to push Congress to enact reform that would allow immigrants in the country illegally to stay to work and eventually seek citizenship.

Meeting outside the federal courthouse, organizers passed out 389 red roses to remember each of the workers arrested by federal agents who descended on the largest employer in Postville, a town of about 2,300 in Northeast Iowa. Workers were arrested and bused to a makeshift courthouse set up at the National Cattle Congress in Waterloo. Many of them pleaded guilty to identity theft charges under immediately-reached plea agreements, served months in prison, and were deported.

In a matter of hours, Postville lost nearly one-fifth of its population and families were torn apart.

Fermin Loyes, 32, said he was arrested while working at the plant, then the nation's largest kosher slaughterhouse, and deported to his native country of Guatemala. He said he was forced to live apart from his wife and two young daughters, Merlin and Ivana, now 10 and 6, for three years before he was able to return on a special visa. His daughters joined the march, waving American flags and signs calling for reform.

"It was very sad, very difficult. I don't want to remember that day," he said. "We want reform so we can live here, so that we can have a nice life." More than 250 people gathered outside the courthouse, a site they said was chosen because of federal officials' role in the raid and prosecutions. The building also houses an office of U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley, a Republican, where the protesters delivered a letter asking him to support immigration reform.

Grassley, a ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, is playing a key role in the debate in Washington.

The group chanted for reform while walking a mile to a Catholic church for an interfaith prayer service, where Archbishop Jerome Hanus of Dubuque said the memories of Postville were still fresh.

"We wear like a shroud the shock, the fear, the shame, the crushing injustices of Postville," he said. "We stand as witnesses to a rush of events that shattered lives, crushed hopes and scattered families."

Hanus offered a prayer for "forgiveness and healing" for those affected, and for reconciliation with federal officials responsible for the raid. Representatives of U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin and Rep. Bruce Braley, both Democrats, read statements denouncing the raid and calling it a symbol of the nation's broken immigration system.

Samuel Lopez, 28, said he was lucky: He had a day off on the day of the raid and was spared. His daughter had been born two weeks earlier. But Lopez said his brother was arrested and deported to Guatemala. He recalled how his friends and family members were crying and scared.

"I want him to come back. He could have a better life here," Lopez said of his brother. "We want reform and we want it now. Things can't wait anymore."