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## A hard year, a cloudy future

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## POSTVILLE: ONE YEAR AFTER THE AGRIPROCESSORS RAID



Photos by RICK TIBBOTT / Courier Staff Photographer

A crowd waits outside the Postville Food Pantry as volunteers stock shelves with canned, dried goods as well as a variety of frozen meats in Postville on May 6. Supplied by the Northeast Iowa Food Bank, the Postville Food Pantry's service is available to residents of Postville and surrounding communities.

# A hard year, a cloudy future

First in a series.

By JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD  
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**POSTVILLE** — People fill the sidewalk outside the food pantry every Wednesday as downtown Postville's businesses wake up and open their doors.

Since Agriprocessors, the town's kosher meatpacking plant, declared bankruptcy in November, it's one of the few reasons for people to congregate on main street. A mix of longtime residents and Latino immigrants arrive to grab numbers to ensure they walk the aisles first when the pantry opens in the afternoon.

They grab valuable rations of cooking oil, sugar and soap that fly off the shelves, leaving less desirable fare behind — canned meats, fruits and vegetables.

"The line is so long even if you



Audrey Wedo stocks shelves at the Postville Food Pantry.

come early," said Magdalena Toj, a former Agriprocessors worker who waited in the rain with her child last week.

But like the rest of Postville, Toj is tired. She is tired of waiting in

line, tired of not working and most of all, tired of an uncertain future.

"When it's sunny, raining or cold, you're out here, because if you come later you don't get anything good," she said.

A year of uncertainty has taken its toll on the small town. Postville's mayor resigned this spring in frustration and exhaustion.

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# TIMELINE

**May 19**  
The Social Security Administration sends Agriprocessors a letter that S.S. numbers of 461 of its employees for the 2000 tax year don't match the names they were used with. Similar letters are addressed to the company in 2006.



**April 17**  
U.S. General Services Administration and National Cattle Congress sign a lease for use of NCC grounds. The lease is for \$110,385 for 25 days.

**Early May**  
Fearing an immigration raid, Agriprocessors officials allegedly implement a plan to fire workers and rehire them with new IDs.

**May 12: DAY OF RAID**  
ICE agents detain 389 undocumented workers at Agriprocessors and seize 96 fake resident alien cards. It is called the largest single-site immigration raid in history. Detainees are housed at the National Cattle Congress grounds in Waterloo, and those charged with criminal offense have hearings at temporary courtrooms there.



**Oct. 30**  
U.S. Attorney's Office for Northern Iowa charges against former Agriprocessors executive Sholom Rubashkin for conspiracy to harbor undocumented immigrants for financial gain, aiding and abetting document fraud and aiding and abetting aggravated identity theft. Other charges come in a series of grand jury indictments, and other supervisors and the company itself are later charged with similar offenses.



**Nov. 8**  
Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents begin using an undercover informant. Sometimes wired with a recording device, the informant obtains a job at Agriprocessors in January 2007.



**May 4**  
The Courier prints an article noting the suspension of activities at NCC for what NCC officials say is a federal government training exercise.

**May 9**  
A special agent with ICE applies for a search warrant for Agriprocessors.

**July**  
A federal grand jury hands up indictments against two Agriprocessors supervisors. Charges against human resources employees soon follow.

**Sept. 9**  
The Iowa Attorney General charges Agriprocessors, Abraham and Sholom Rubashkin and others with more than 9,000 counts of child labor violations.

**Nov. 4**  
Agriprocessors files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in New York. The case is later moved to Iowa.

**March**  
A sale of the Agriprocessors company falls through.

Courier graphic / JORDAN HANSEN

## POSTVILLE

Town still struggling a year after huge immigration raid  
From page A1

City leaders, churches and passionate volunteers have struggled to work together behind a unified vision for the future of Postville.

"I would have thought as we approached the one year anniversary we'd be a lot further along," said Jeff Abbas, general manager of Postville's community radio station.

Residents find themselves starting from scratch in their efforts to live up to Postville's motto, "Hometown to the World." They worked hard to build a comfortable, easy trust with neighbors who hailed from every corner of the globe, a community they saw go up in a cloud of federal agents and arrests a year ago.

"Trust is hard, especially when this community has been so challenged and shaken to its foundation," said Maryn Olson, coordinator for the Postville Response Coalition. "There are so many unknowns. The emotional burden of waiting and not knowing is hard."

Longtime residents said they have grown increasingly anxious watching the plant's government-appointed executive struggle to find a buyer, which they hope will save the town's once vibrant economy.

Immigrant workers caught in the raid remain stranded in legal limbo, awaiting moving court dates that never arrive.

Federal authorities grabbed fewer than half of the workers than they anticipated on May 12 last year, so many immigrants not caught in the raid remain in Postville living underground. Without jobs at the plant they can't find work, and they don't have the means to move on or even return to their home countries.

On a muggy morning after a spring thunderstorm, Carol Deering sat in her garage as three Guatemalan women pushing strollers meandered up to her sale.

Some residents say the raid brought a much-needed cleansing of lawlessness at the plant, but most everyone questions the cost. Deering said she grows sad when she



Roselia Ramirez, center, holds the hand of her daughter Brittaniam Ramirez, left, as she carries bags of food, with help from Ida Heins, right, to her car after picking up the items from the Postville Food Pantry.

thinks of the devastated lives since the raid.

"I think as you look around our town and you see all the empty houses and empty buildings downtown, it's sad. We had a nice community here," she said.

The children gravitate towards a shiny bike helmet and slap it with their tiny hands. The mothers hold up T-shirts to their chests, keeping one eye on the kids.

Sylvia, 22, admitted that since the raid an awful thought has crossed her mind: It would be easier if Alejandra, her 1-year-old daughter, was not with them.

A former Agriprocessors worker, Sylvia declined to give her last name because she immigrated illegally. Her husband has been in jail, presumably awaiting deportation, since March, when police near Vinton pulled over the car he was riding in.

"After the raid, all the doors shut to us," she said.

The stakes are just as high for the hundreds of Jewish people still in Postville, said Aaron Goldsmith, a former city councilman. Families bought homes and rely on Jewish schools, grocery stores and a synagogue to maintain their lifestyle.

Jewish workers at Agriprocessors worked for months without pay, and took labor-intensive jobs formerly filled

by immigrant workers in a failed attempt to rescue the plant.

"To some degree, there's an even deeper fear about the future. What is a ritual slaughterer going to do without a job at Agriproces-

sors? He can't become an accountant or work at Walmart. He's finished. He'll pack up and leave," he said.

Despite the struggles, the will to recover is strong. St. Bridget's Catholic Church continues to work around

the clock to help the community's immigrants pay for food and rent. The city has teamed up with the Postville Recovery Coalition to offer a home rehabilitation project to clean up yards and homes uninhabited for most of the

last year. The University of Iowa's Institute of Public Affairs recently started working with town residents to develop a strategic long-term plan for Postville.

Amidst all the recovery efforts, a feeling of treading water in a storm permeates everything.

Kim Schutte, a carpenter in Postville, fixed up a funeral home just east of downtown last week. Between trips to his car for supplies, he said he thinks about his future every day. He tries not to imagine what many consider a doomsday scenario:

"If the plant closes and leaves, there's going to be ... I don't know what's going to happen," he said.

Abbas is one of Postville's voices pushing for the town to imagine life after Agriprocessors. To whomever will listen, he broadcasts his vision of a publicly owned plant that processes specialty meats, everything from kosher to organic chicken.

Yet even he admits the best-laid plans will gather dust until Agriprocessors is sold or shut down.

"How can we move forward if we don't know what we're moving forward from?" Abbas said.



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