A hard year, a cloudy future

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First in a series.

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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 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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On a muggy morning after huge immigration raid in New York. The case is later moved to Iowa.

"If the plant closes and the town's economy dies in 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 children, 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," 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 Agriprocessors? 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.

"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 as 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.