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In an Iowa town, a Kosher Meat Plant Struggles to Recover

By Betsy Rubiner

On a workday last week in the northeast Iowa town of Postville, a young man who identified himself as an illegal immigrant from Guatemala, leaned idly against a storefront. He'd rather be working, he explained, but he can't return to his job at Agriprocessors, Inc. That's the meatpacking plant where 389 workers, including some of his relatives, were arrested during a May immigration raid. "Too much fear," he says. "But we have to live here because Guatemala is very bad."

Across the street, Samir Jaylani, 21, gathered with other Somali refugees newly arrived from the Minneapolis area to take jobs at the plant, which is trying to rebuild its workforce after losing about half of its staff in the immigration raid. But Agriprocessors is having a hard time keeping new arrivals on the job. Jaylani quit after one day processing turkeys. "I didn't get trained enough," he says. "It was highly dangerous equipment. I wouldn't take the chance of cutting my hand off."

Around the corner, dozens of people — many of them current and former Agriprocessors employees — lined up for free canned and packaged goods at Postville's weekly food pantry. "I haven't seen a paycheck over \$100 and it's my fifth week," says Darrell Hawkins, 46, a former forklift operator from Kentucky now working a "gutter" at Agriprocessors. (He removes turkey giblets.)

A company spokesman, in an interview last week, vigorously denied any wrongdoing. Agriprocessors says it did not knowingly hire illegal immigrants or underage workers, claiming that minors had lied about their age to get jobs. And the company emphasized that it offers its employees rigorous safety training.

As Agriprocessors faces mounting legal and commercial challenges while struggling to regain its standing as the nation's largest kosher meat supplier, residents of this town of 2,273 are nervous. The company sought to address concerns in the community and beyond last week by hiring a new CEO,

New York attorney Bernard S. Feldman. "I have every intention of making Agriprocessors a model of kosher production," Feldman said in a statement, pledging that the company will work closely with governmental agencies concerned with product safety, labor rights and the humane treatment of animals. Feldman's appointment came a day after the plant's owner, manager and three human resources managers entered not-guilty pleas on over 9,000 misdemeanor charges of illegally using child labor at the plant. A Federal grand jury also indicted two of the human resources managers, charging them with helping workers obtain false documents.

The leadership change followed a demand by a major kosher-certification agency, the Orthodox Union, that Agriprocessors replace its CEO or risk losing the agency's seal of approval, which would be a catastrophic blow for a kosher meat supplier. Questions had also arisen over whether the slaughtering techniques used in the plant had complied with koshering standards, after a video filmed undercover in the plant by the animal rights group PETA showed slaughtering techniques that some observers suggested were at odds with koshering practices. Federal inspectors cited Agriprocessors for violating a regulation pertaining to humane slaughtering methods, although they did not consider the violation egregious, and confirmed that it had been corrected. Agriprocessors is also challenging a state citation in August for 31 alleged violations of workplace safety regulations.

Restoring the plant's production to the pre-raid levels is made more difficult by the challenges of hiring a new workforce. Although it has recruited workers both from elsewhere in the U.S. and from as far away as the Pacific island of Palau, employee turnover remains a problem. Management is also confronting efforts by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union to organize at the plant, as well as competition from a Minnesota meatpacker that boldly scheduled a job fair in Postville last week, offering higher wages than those paid by Agriprocessors.

The troubles at the kosher meat plant are felt throughout the town, with reports of small businesses faltering, fights at the local tavern, and rising tension between residents of different backgrounds.

"It's the worst thing that could be happening to this town," says Paul Real, director of the Hispanic ministry at St. Bridget's Catholic Church. "The streets are full of people that aren't working. The food pantry sees over 100 clients, when it used to see about 30."

Many Latino residents have left, including almost 300 former Agriprocessors workers now serving five-month prison sentences after pleading guilty to identity-theft charges. They are expected to be deported next month. A further 45, mostly women, who were released on humanitarian grounds but required to wear electronic ankle bracelets, have not yet faced charges. Ten were permitted to return to Guatemala or Mexico. Others hope to convince the courts to allow them to remain in the United

States, according to their lawyer. And many of those who eluded arrest are believed to have fled or are lying low.

Churches that had stepped up to provide basic needs for those left unable to work or to leave after the raid are now hard-pressed to help new arrivals who bring little with them and need help with everything from medical care to bus tickets home. Some of the new arrivals complain of having been lured here by false promises, finding lower pay than expected, high rent, poor housing and harsh work conditions.

"We're just trying to get out of Postville," says Marcus Valdez, 39, who arrived from Texas with his pregnant wife and two young children but left Agriprocessors after five weeks. During his time there, he says he injured his forearm and his eye was infected by turkey innards.

Church leaders, whose humanitarian efforts were boosted by donations from around the country, are now running low on funds and supplies. "I just wish they would help these immigrants so they could work here easily," says Dona Peck, 67, a local volunteer who was helping people stock up last week. "They're needed. A lot of them are just nice family people."

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