

# Raw Nerves Remain After New ICE Arrest in Iowa

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Editor's Note: A targeted arrest of a single undocumented worker exactly six weeks after a major immigration raid netted 389 undocumented at the local Agriprocessors meatpacking plant has the town on edge. Marcelo Ballvé is a New York-based writer with New America Media.

POSTVILLE, Iowa – When plainclothes immigration agents wearing sunglasses and baseball caps conducted an arrest in downtown Postville, Iowa the morning of June 23, their presence didn't go unnoticed.

Immediately, the "town was turned on its head," according to local immigrant advocates.

Exactly six weeks before, on May 12, Postville had been the site of a massive, helicopter-aided immigration raid in which 389 undocumented workers were arrested at the local Agriprocessors meatpacking plant. So when the small detachment of immigration agents returned, many townspeople relived the day of the original raid, which will likely never be forgotten in Postville.

"My nerves were eating me up inside," says Elvira Esparza, 28, one of the 43 Agriprocessors workers who were released after being detained the day of the May 12 raid with monitoring devices strapped to their ankles, so they can care for their children while they await immigration court dates.

The June 23 action, though small, underscores how raw nerves remain in Postville, and also punctuates the fragility of the town's transition to normalcy.

Esparza says she received a call around 10 a.m. from an acquaintance who told her that "immigration agents were in Postville again, and that this time they were dressed as civilians and walking around the streets." Esparza says she immediately called her close friends and told them not to venture outside. "We had no idea why they were here again."

As it turned out, the agents were after a specific target, Eduardo Ixen, a Guatemalan handyman who worked for a local property owner. Several witnesses saw Ixen, his hands cuffed behind his back, being led across Main Street in Postville's tiny downtown, flanked by the plainclothes agents.

"The town was turned on its head," says Luz María Ramírez, spokeswoman for immigrant aid efforts organized at St. Bridget's Catholic Church in the raid's aftermath.

"People began calling the church saying they didn't know what to do, that they didn't want to leave their homes. There was a lot of fear, and more uncertainty."

Rumors flew that agents had detained Ixen on a public street, or that Ixen had at first escaped and had been chased down.

At least two immigrants contend that they were trailed by an immigration agent in an unmarked vehicle. "I was followed by a man in a car when I went to the post office, and he didn't take his eyes off me until I pulled my pant leg up and showed him I had an ankle (device)," says Esparza, who believes the agents' visit was in part meant to show immigrants remaining in Postville that they were still being watched.

There's no new policy of taking immigration enforcement into the streets or homes of Postville, only an ongoing policy of responding to specific leads, says Tim Counts, spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) offices in Minneapolis. "Whenever we do an enforcement action, these kinds of rumors always fly rampant." However, he adds, "If we're looking for someone and we find them on the street, of course we'll arrest them."

The agents sent to Postville were responding to a tip about Ixen, says Counts. He was arrested at the offices where he worked in downtown Postville, and was charged with being in the country illegally.

Meanwhile, six weeks after the original raid, dozens of families still live in limbo. Mothers or fathers are wearing GPS-enabled ankle bracelets and are unable to work or leave the country, as they await immigration proceedings that will send them home, or perhaps, in some cases, allow them to stay.

Yet a majority of them haven't received notice of when they are to appear in immigration court, though they are technically under ICE custody and are being monitored.

"They have no choices at this point, because nothing is happening in their cases," says lawyer Sonia Parras Konrad, who represents many of the detainees wearing ankle bracelets, several of whom only want to be speedily returned to their countries.

Parras blames ICE for the standstill. Among other irregularities, the agency has not forwarded relevant paperwork to the immigration court so that it may begin to process the cases, at which time lawyers could seek legal remedies for them.

"That's the biggest issue for them, that so much is unknown," says David Vásquez, campus pastor at Luther College in nearby Decorah, Iowa.

"Now they have to rely on charity for food with which to feed their kids," says Parras, "and they face eviction – they could end up wearing their ankle bracelets on the street."

A free food pantry run twice weekly by local churches is being overwhelmed by requests,

and the regional relief effort can't keep up with demand – not only for food, but for rent checks, legal aid, help with paperwork, and multiple requests for rides so wives can visit arrested husbands in faraway prisons.

The federal government has left the non-profits, charities and churches to "pick up the pieces" after the raid, says Sol Varisco, Migration and Refugee Services coordinator at the Des Moines Catholic Diocese. "This is outrageous."

Immigrants stranded by the raid in Postville aren't the only ones struggling. So is Agriprocessors, the massive kosher meatpacking plant at the edge of town that was the site of the original raid. Having lost roughly one-third of its workforce, and facing a host of legal and public relations challenges, the plant's management has gone on the counterattack.

To begin with, the company has hired high-powered New York public relations law firm 5WPR to help brush up its image and handle media queries.

Juda Engelmayer, 5WPR senior vice president, says he can't give any specifics on the degree to which the plant has recovered personnel or production. But he says they're "going out, looking for a new workforce," and have hired three staffing agencies to help, mounting a multi-state search for properly skilled, U.S. resident or citizen employees.

Engelmayer flatly denies some former Agriprocessors workers' charges that the plant had a systematic policy of leaving overtime unpaid, looking the other way when underage hiring occurred, and alleviating undocumented workers' fears by telling them immigration was being paid off.

Engelmayer notes that former Missouri U.S. Attorney Jim Martin has now been hired as chief compliance officer at the plant.

"He's a no-nonsense kind of guy and he's not going to put his name on anything shady," he says.