

Workers say 400 detained in Worthington raid

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WORTHINGTON, MINN. - An early morning raid Tuesday shut down the nation's No. 2 meatpacker, as federal agents launched a six-state hunt for illegal workers who allegedly used stolen identities to get hired.

The raids targeted six plants of Swift & Co., including the pork-processing facility that employs 2,300 in Worthington, Minn., in what the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement termed "a large identity theft scheme that has victimized large numbers of U.S. citizens and lawful residents."

Officials wouldn't say how many arrests were made in Worthington, but plant workers said that at least 400 were detained Tuesday morning out of a first-shift workforce of about 1,000.

Witnesses saw 10 buses lined up to take people away, said Alondra Espejel of the St. Paul-based Minnesota Immigrant Freedom Network.

The raid began about 8 a.m., witnesses said. The "kill floor" was shut down at 10:30 and workers were taken to the cafeteria.

The detainees were later bused to federal detention centers in Sioux Falls, S.D., and Iowa.

Teresa Ramirez, 42, a legal immigrant, said she saw some workers at the plant bound with plastic cuffs and heard women screaming about who would pick up their children. She said she was not detained.

"Truthfully speaking, they treated us like trash," said Veronica Carabantes Maravilla, 33, whose daughter had to bring her green card to the plant.

"They treated the legals and illegals alike," Maravilla said through an interpreter.

Action criticized

The raids were denounced by Swift and by worker and immigrant advocacy groups as an attack on civil liberties.

And in Worthington, a city of 12,000 in the state's southwestern corner, the raid spread panic in homes and schools, where about 39 percent of the students are Hispanic and many are children of Swift workers.

A school bus driver dropped five children off at Comunidad Cristiana de Worthington Church when no one answered the doors at their homes, said the Rev. Hector Andrade, the church's pastor.

Other parish members were at the church Tuesday evening to help the children. "They're just crying," said Andrade, who said volunteers were going door to door to check for more children whose parents may have been detained.

Andrade said people were coming to the church to take shelter because they don't feel secure at home.

"Right now they don't trust anybody," he said.

Detained workers will be released if they are sole caregivers, said Tim Counts, a Minnesota spokesman for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The agency set up a toll-free phone number (1-866-341-3858) staffed by English and Spanish speakers to offer information on people who may have been detained.

The investigation began in February after officials learned that some Swift workers might be using stolen Social Security cards and other documents.

Counts said authorities believe that hundreds of stolen identities also might have been used by workers at Swift plants in Texas, Utah, Colorado, Nebraska and Iowa. The targeted plants account for all of Swift's beef production and 77 percent of its pork production.

Last month, according to federal court records, immigration agents searched the apartment of a Worthington man suspected of dealing in stolen birth certificates and Social Security cards.

Swift, a privately owned company based in Greeley, Colo., has not been accused of any wrongdoing. But the company issued a sharply worded statement Tuesday, saying, "Swift believes that today's actions by the government violate the agreements associated with the company's participation over the past 10 years in the federal government's Basic Pilot worker authorization program."

The statement was referring to a verification system that allows employers to check job applicants against federal databases.

"Swift has played by the rules and relied in good faith on a program explicitly held out by the president of the United States as an effective tool to help employers comply with applicable immigration laws," the company's CEO, Sam Rovit, said.

Company officials couldn't be reached Tuesday. In January, a Swift official told the Star Tribune that the federal system for identifying illegal workers was "broken," because of workers using Social Security numbers and documents that were real but belonged to others.

The raids are certain to inflame debate over the nation's immigration policy, said Paula Duthoy, a St. Paul immigration attorney.

"What it demonstrates is that employers need people to work," Duthoy said.

'Is it fair to the kids?'

Nurtured by the Swift plant, the rapid rise in the immigrant population in Worthington over the past two decades has made the city a flashpoint in the debate about illegal immigration. On Tuesday, residents were struggling to deal with the local effects of a national crackdown.

"For us, this came out of nowhere," said John Landgaard, Worthington's school superintendent.

"There's no manual for something like this. The question is, is it fair to the kids? They're the ones who are getting hurt in this deal."

The Grand Island Independent in Nebraska reported that after the raid at the Swift plant there, school officials went into "crisis mode."

Schools Superintendent Steve Joel said the parents of 1,100 students work at the meatpacking plant, and the effect on the children is potentially huge.

Two middle schools were being kept open all night and staff, including teachers, counselors and other professionals will work with the displaced children any way they can, Joel said.

Grand Island Police Chief Steve Lamken said he refused to let his officers take part in the raid.

"When this is all over, we're still here taking care of our community and if I have a significant part of my population that's fearful and won't call us, then that's not good for our community," he said.

In Worthington, Mayor Alan Oberloh said he hadn't been to the plant Tuesday and the city was not involved. "We're on the back burner on this one," he said. Deputies from the Nobles County Sheriff's Office also stayed on the sidelines, authorities said.

The Associated Press and staff writers Paul Levy and Dan Browning contributed to this report.