

Handout 4.2 - What Happens When a Town Implodes? – the Postville Raid

By Betsy Rubiner. Time Magazine, Jan. 28, 2000
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During a bitterly cold January week, penniless women and children stream into a Catholic church in the northeastern Iowa town of Postville that has served as their refuge since May 12, when 389 workers were arrested during an immigration raid at the Agriprocessors Inc. meatpacking plant. The women are among 26 former Agriprocessors workers, most from Guatemala and Mexico, charged with immigration violations and fighting deportation. Released on humanitarian grounds but required to wear electronic ankle bracelets, the women, as well as about 59 children, now depend on the community, especially St. Bridget's church, which operates a Hispanic ministry from a worn brick house.

One woman needs medical care for her anxious 12-year-old son, who has started wetting his bed. Another needs legal help for her husband, who was arrested during a return visit to Agriprocessors by immigration agents last fall. "I am very sad and worried," says Irma Lopez, 28, a former Agriprocessors worker who remains in limbo with her young daughter while her husband is back in Guatemala, one of many arrested workers deported in October after serving five months in prison. "I worked since I was 8 years old, and now I feel worthless. I can work, but I'm not allowed to."

Eight months after the Agriprocessors raid, Postville is still grappling with what its leaders call a "humanitarian and economic disaster," compounded by the recession and a harsh winter. Life isn't much easier for "legal" workers. Inside a faded community hall serving as a relief center are Michael Barner, 47, and Patricia Williams, 41, who moved to Postville last month to work at Agriprocessors but had to leave their jobs soon after because of illness. They have arrived with an eviction notice and are seeking help to return to Dubuque. "We came here. We tried. I got sick. We just have to go back home," says Barner.

Almost 400 families, many with lost jobs and wages, have dropped by the center since the community opened it in late November to connect people to resources like food stamps, legal aid and unemployment benefits. "It's just snowballed," says Maryn Olson, the coordinator. "People need decent jobs with a secure income, decent housing. There is hope here, but there are so many uncertainties that there's a lot of fear."

The hope — a cautious hope — is that Agriprocessors, which went bankrupt in November, will soon be sold. An Israeli firm, Soglowek Nahariya Ltd., made a \$40 million offer this month to buy Agriprocessors and a smaller subsidiary plant in Nebraska. "A sale is likely," says Joseph Sarachek, a court-appointed trustee temporarily overseeing Agriprocessors' operations. "This is a real buyer." But he adds that the offer is the opening bid in what will probably be a March auction for the plant, which was once the nation's largest kosher meat producer and once Postville's major employer, with 968 workers. He predicts it will be a few months before the plant is sold and run by a new

owner. Agriprocessors does hope to ramp up hiring and production soon, especially to meet Passover demand. After the raid, the plant ran at reduced capacity but shut down in November, reopening in December with about 300 workers.

Former Agriprocessors CEO Sholom Rubashkin faces federal charges including defrauding a bank, helping illegal immigrants obtain false papers and money-laundering. (He has made no comment on the charges on advice of counsel, but his lawyer Guy Cook says, "Whether it's 99 counts or 9,000 counts, he's pled not guilty.") Other managers face criminal charges, and the plant faces millions in state fines for alleged workplace violations.

Meanwhile, Postville waits.

Help has come primarily from community groups and churches, with donations from near and far. The local food pantry is now open Sundays as well as Wednesdays, serving about 150 people. But some leaders say the help is not enough and worry about shortages and increasing hardships, especially evictions. In December, a citizens' group faxed a letter to state and federal leaders that said, "Postville is a community in turmoil, a broken, hurting place ... If Postville was reeling after the raid, recent events have brought the town to its knees. What happens when a place implodes?"

With Agriprocessors' future uncertain, so too are the prospects for farmers who are owed money for cattle and workers owed back wages. Postville's faltering small businesses have lost customers. The town, already facing over \$300,000 in unpaid property-tax and utility bills, could be liable for millions more if Agriprocessors completely shuts down, because the town is responsible for paying the balance of a federal loan used to build a sewage-treatment lagoon for the meatpacker.

While other Iowa communities devastated in 2008 by floods and tornadoes have received government aid, relatively little is available for Postville, once a vibrant community of some 2,300 people. "They don't have money for an economic humanitarian disaster. Believe me, we've asked," says Darcy Radloff, the city clerk. Two AmeriCorps Vista volunteers were recently assigned to Postville, and the town, known for its inflated rental properties, has received almost \$700,000 in government grant money to help residents pay rent and utilities (although reported problems include landlords' reluctance to accept the payments because they're lower than the rent they charge). However, undocumented people are not eligible for government programs, so they must rely upon the community and especially St. Bridget's, which also is helping 25 "witnesses" — Agriprocessors workers returned to the Postville area after prison to serve as potential witnesses in a trial against Agriprocessors managers, scheduled for September. (The "witnesses" have been granted temporary work permits.)

Some former Agriprocessors workers like Lopez hope to remain and work legally, although they long to be reunited with relatives sent back to their native lands. Many townspeople hope a responsible buyer will revive the plant. "We'd like to see somebody who buys it and makes it an honest business," says Radloff.