

Basu: And again, poor get mistreated

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Floods have a way of washing up dirty secrets, such as the hidden poverty among many of the victims. Now we're seeing a full circle of misfortune, in the treatment of the poor, largely immigrant labor pool brought in to clean up Iowa's flood mess.

Religious leaders held a press conference by phone last week to denounce the working conditions of workers bused in to clean up in Cedar Rapids, Cedar Falls and Waterloo.

They described 12-to-14-hour workdays in buildings full of rot and mold; 80 people packed into six or seven motel rooms; a man ordered to sleep on or under a bus; a woman suffering a heart attack and nearly dying after a long shift. Workers were operating without protective gear or tetanus shots, said the Rev. Catherine Quehl-Engel, chaplain at Cornell College. That's where temporary workers hired by One Source Staffing and Labor, out of Olathe, Kan., were housed at first. Paid below Iowa's \$7.25-an-hour minimum wage, they were charged \$49 to get to and from the work sites. They had to endure a 14-hour, detour-delayed bus trip from Kansas City with no food. She said the debit cards they were given for their \$15 daily food allowance didn't work. She eventually got the temp agencies to sign contracts agreeing to comply with health and safety regulations.

One Source's Rodney Strong, director of operations at Kansas headquarters, acknowledges workers might work up to 14 hours a day, seven days a week, but says they signed contracts agreeing to that. Quehl-Engel says many speak only Spanish and couldn't read them. Strong said a clerical error delayed the adjustment to Iowa's minimum wage. He said protective gear took a few days to arrive, and acknowledged the company failed to ask about tetanus shots. He said 53 worker injuries have been reported, including multiple cases of dermatitis, a strained elbow, twisted ankle, broken finger and lip. All got medical treatment.

The 175 workers had to be hired in a hurry, and the bus ride was long because roads were flooded, Strong said, but food stops were made: "If someone didn't eat, it was because they chose not to."

The continuum of suffering among the most vulnerable is no coincidence, says Iowa's Episcopal bishop, Alan Scarfe: "The aftermath of Katrina exposed that underclass of poverty, and here we are again in a different place like Iowa and who are the ones being abused and mistreated?"

Scarfe says Iowa is known for its arrests of immigrant workers through raids like the one on Agriprocessors in Postville, because we're not considered "a community of protest."

Why? Iowa is a caring, compassionate community to those it considers members. And as Bishop Gregory Palmer of

the United Methodist Conference said, communities can be judged by how we treat members "without regard for how they became members."

The federal government is intent on penalizing laborers here illegally while unscrupulous employers like Agriprocessors escape serious penalties. But the state, at least, can make sure workers' rights are upheld. Lawmakers should correct the lack of a legal limit to the hours someone can be required to work in Iowa.

The faith community deserves credit for its leadership on this. Now, the rest of us should engage with and advocate for those doing our dirty work, signaling Washington that we're one community, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.