

# Chaplain says workers battle poor conditions

By Kristina Andino  
The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — Some out-of-state visitors to the city have been dealing with the disgusting, likely toxic goo left behind by the floods.

"These poor, hardworking men and women are the calloused hands of Christ tending Iowa's wounds and grief," writes Cornell College Chaplain Catherine Quehl-Engel in a guest editorial today. "In return I (wonder) whether Iowa and other flooded states will care for and protect them."

About 150 temporary workers have been staying at Cornell's Pauley-Rorem dorms. They are working with ServiceMaster to clean downtown Cedar Rapids, but are paid by the agencies ServiceMaster contracted with. Officials from one of them, One Source Staffing and Labor, with offices in Kansas and Texas, could not be reached Friday.

Quehl-Engel — who is college chaplain but said she speaks only for herself — is speaking out about the working conditions the employees endure.

She said workers, who are primarily African-American and Hispanic, told her they were not given tetanus shots. They told her they earn less than Iowa's minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, plus \$15 daily for food and expenses, and have to pay for gas for the bus to Cedar Rapids. Others told her they rode a bus for 14 hours without food.

ServiceMaster only works with licensed subcontractors, which must comply with state laws, said Chad Reichert, general manager of ServiceMaster 380.

"We pay the temp agencies \$15 to \$18 per hour, and they are responsible for their employees after that," Reichert added.

The Gazette caught up with workers on Thursday night.



(Courtney Sargent/The Gazette)

One Source temporary employee Amanda Ebbs, 18, (center) of Kansas City, Mo., wipes sweat from her forehead after throwing carpet into a trash bin at 222 Third Ave. SE in Cedar Rapids on Friday. Ebbs was hired by ServiceMaster through One Source to clean up flood-damaged property in downtown Cedar Rapids.

Amanda Ebbs, 18, and Terrance Hamilton, 31, are both from Kansas City, Mo., and were hired by One Source.

They said they were told they would be paid \$100 per workday and \$25 a day for food and other living expenses. Instead, they make \$7 an hour and earn \$15 a day for expenses, they said.

"They told us today that (the amount promised) was for a previous job" that was now complete, said Ebbs, who with other workers has been cleaning the Coffee Emporium, the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and other downtown areas.

"Our bus ride was 12 hours," Ebbs said. "It was supposed to be five hours. We got here on Tuesday morning after getting no sleep ... and they took us to Waterloo to work" right away. When workers complained, they were bused back to Cornell. Everyone is now working in Cedar Rapids, she said.

Workers said they were told they would stay in a hotel, and the company would provide free transportation. They are being charged \$7 per day for gas to get to and from work sites. Ebbs said she was told to take the smallest bag possible, and is glad she brought soap — an example of something a hotel would be expected to have. ServiceMaster managers have bought gloves and lunch for them when One Source has not, Ebbs said.

One Source and possibly other agencies are putting workers' earnings on prepaid cards, but workers said some people were shorted earnings. For others — like men who asked for anonymity because they wanted to keep their jobs — the money shows on the machine's screen, but they are not able to access it all.

They said they have been told that on Sunday, they will be moved to a hotel.

Cornell officials have met daily with managers, and "wrote health and safety provisions into their contract" to stay in the dorms, said Blake Rasmussen, Cornell media relations director. "As far as I know, they're working to meet them.

"A lot of issues started getting solved when management was able to get here on Wednesday."

Workers started coming Sunday, without much supervision or direction, he said.

Things have been improving, said Quehl-Engel. Workers are now being vaccinated against tetanus, and managers have told her workers are now being paid Iowa's minimum wage. But they are still working seven days a week, something she also fought to stop, she said.

"In fairness to them," said Quehl-Engel, "this company is as overwhelmed as everybody

else is in how to respond. This was a managerial breakdown.

"I think it's fortuitous that they landed at a liberal arts college that had a high level of consciousness about social justice issues. I don't know how often they are given ethical demands on safety and health and basic human decency."



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**Posted By:** Lindsey Peterson      **Post Date:** 06/24/08 02:28:00 PM

**Title:** From Cornell Chaplain

From Cornell Chaplain:

After further conversation with an exhausted, sleep deprived temp agency manager, I am reminded that these cleaning companies are working day laborers so hard in the wake of our floods because they can't keep up with demand. They are being pressured by Iowa businesses to give them more workers and to worker faster for quicker recovery time. Their struggle to lodge all the people is also an issue, resulting in too many workers in limited spaces. They can't keep up with the demand, so we have a systemic problem here in Iowa with what is happening to day laborers. It's not simply the companies, but the state. Seems like protective legislative action needs consideration. I'm simply a priest/chaplain and not an expert on such matters but from my angle, here is where I see possible directions:

1. Worker contracts by these temp agencies be available in both English and Spanish (and other languages for immigrant populations if needed). Told by two Hispanic non-English speaking women that the contracts they signed were only in English.
2. Mandate masks, goggles, tetanus and other safety and health items not only be provided at company expense, but mandate that both temp agencies and larger companies like Service Master enforce that they be worn when working with hazardous materials as they are in these post-flood clean up efforts (Service Master and other umbrella companies contracting with temp agencies no longer able to point the finger back at the temp agencies.) Mandate this both in Iowa and across the U.S.. Please note that a temp agency manager told me on the day Cornell required all 150 workers to receive tetanus shots that other company managers he spoke with weren't providing shots.
3. Mandate a 6 day only work day and/or limitation on hours of work per day. Something similar to what we do for truck drivers. Only difference is that instead of trucks wearing out and being dangerous from truck driver exhaustion, the bodies of these workers are wearing out. I realize that the incentive for overtime is there, but that's how companies are able to lure people into these unsafe situations. Keep Maria's story in mind that I tell below (only three hours of sleep a night and needing to be resuscitated; she preferred death over the

resuscitation that was provided).

4. Making it illegal for these companies to earn profits off their workers by charging transit fees to work sites. Craig said some may critique this legislative action pointing out how the rest of us pay for gas in order to get back and forth to work.. A difference, though, is that you've got 15+ workers piled into vans; also the 37 African Americans who sat in a school bus w/ no air conditioning and 14 hours of not being fed. Note: a friend doing van sharing from Mt. Vernon to University of Iowa in Iowa City was paying \$40 a month. These workers at Cornell are being charged \$49 a week. A temp agency manager said that other states (he mentioned Illinois but I can't verify this) have laws against these transit charges.

5. \$15 a day for food and other rations is not possible when eating out. They are trying to buy groceries but days past without the activation of their atm cards and often what was put into their account. For those buying groceries, they are having to spend that \$ on pots and pans and other incidentals like filling of prescriptions. A man who ask me to pray for his healing had a stress induced migraine but the company wouldn't pay for the meds because it was deemed a pre-existing condition. Had to choose between eating or pain meds off that \$15 a day. Must have a minimum stipend that honors basic human decency.

6. Humane living conditions; limits on the number of people in a hotel or apartment. Limits on # of people transported in vans.

7. More controversial but we need to get our heads out of the sand: Bi-partisan Immigration reform. President Bush desires this too. Something requiring work permits registration/ consequences if violated, but everyone gets protected; require drivers license, insurance, etc. Citizenship procedures abided by, but again, protecting day laborers and making them more 'above board.' We obviously need them for our economy, not to mention or state and national disaster clean up. They work jobs few others desire.

Peace,

Catherine Quehl-Engel  
Chaplain of Cornell College

**Posted By:** matt james      **Post Date:** 06/23/08 07:03:00 PM

**Title:** the are choices

i feel your pain...but there are choices here. I would ask the following, "If they told you you would be paid \$100 a day plus \$25 for food", was that in WRITING anywhere? perhapd this is a lesson learned about oral contracts. if it were me, (and this would have been addresses and in w"not our problem, we hired contractos than then hiredriting BEFORE i started or took the job) if i would have got there and suddenly i am getting paid only minimum wage and not what was agreed to, i would have been on the next bus home and said, "sorry sucker - not this guy". i am sure there are going to be plenty of "licensed contractors" hired by servicemaster that have a bunch of illegal aliens working for them, and service master will say "not out problem. we hired contractors that then hired illegals. we didn't ire illegals". just like the cleanup of flood ravaged mississippi. you should have seen the line at wal mart on fridays of people lining up to send pesos to mexico. it was like an invasion. there was no way someone from the midwest was oing to make money there..not with all those 'undocumented'. compaines don't care about that. it is all about the \$\$\$ and their greed to not to pay out. it is a calculated risk and they figure the chances of getting busted are slim. anyone think it is coincidence that there are so many hispancis and illegals busted at swift and other food processing plants? hardly. how do illegals in guatemala or wherever even HEAR about IOWA in the first place. before you say "they do the jobs americans won't" - that is bull. if you pay a person enough, they'll do it. what do they say when they RIP us? oh yeah, "supply and demand"

**Posted By:** L C      **Post Date:** 06/23/08 12:39:00 PM

**Title:** Give it a break!!!

I would just like to say that here in America, people have choices. If these workers don't like the working environment, get out of it. These people are not forced to do this job, they choose to except it.

As far as working conditions, what did they expect?

Long hours.... a lot of people are working 7 days a week during this disaster. Do you want it cleaned up or not? As Rodney stated, these people choose to work the 7 days a week, they are getting paid over time, and whether you like it or not, money talks!

Good luck getting a hotel room anywhere in Eastern Iowa! They are full of displaced people and business from the flood. Now, One Source is renting houses and apartments for these people that should be going to the flood victims so that they can have some kind of normalcy in their lives again. They are the ones who need the housing more than these people who made the choice to come and help and who will be leaving in a month or so.

I would also like to point out that in the picture, I do see people wearing gloves, did you ever think that maybe the ones not wearing them choose not to, not that they were not being provided.

As for the 12 hour ride, once again, Rodney was right again, so many roads were closed. How else were they supposed to get here? Everyone had to take a detour!

This Chaplain has clearly spoken out with out looking at all the facts first... She needs to realize that some people would complain about a free meal just to be complaining. Sometimes when you take up a cause just for the sake of taking it up, you end up making a fool of yourself in the process and that is what has happened here.

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**Posted By:** Rodney Director of Operations One Source

**Post Date:** 06/23/08 09:59:00 AM

**Title:** Midwest Flooding

I wanted to take time to address the concerns of the people in the flood ravaged midwest states.

This article addresses many things and I will try and touch on many of them. First of all, this is a terrible tragedy to the people living in the affected regions, companies such as One Source are in the business of supplying people to contracted restoration companies. We have provided people to these companies during some on our countries greatest tragedies, including 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. We have crews that work throughout the year on nothing but disaster and clean-up jobsites. They have traveled to nearly every state in the US including a crew that was sent to Hawaii to help at a United States Naval base. These are experienced crews that number over 80 people.

When a catastrophe of this magnitude hits, the numbers that are requested of us our mind boggling. We currently have over 450 people working out of town in the midwest working on flood recovery and tornado aftermath. We have more orders (for an additional 600+ workers) that we have had to turn down due to the fact that we are at our limits.

When we advertised these jobs we clearly stated that an employee could "earn up to \$100 a day and would be given per diem" for work out of town. The reason that their earnings are put on debit cards is so that a person can be paid while out of town. Cutting a check to someone who is out of town does not make a lot of sense because they would have no place to cash it and if they could find a place that would cash it, where does one keep that money safe? They have the option with the debit card to use them at stores, ATM's or have the money transferred to their banking account free of charge.

THE BUS RIDE- Yes the bus ride was long, a five hour trip turned into 10+ hours. Because of the flooding there seems to be some roads that have been closed in the midwest. It is understandable that people view the trip as a 5 hour drive on a normal day...these are not normal days. Also addressed was the policy of charging money for transportation. These employees are not using their own vehicles, we supply a fleet of vans, school buses and coach buses to transport them to and from jobsites. If they were using their own vehicles, they would be paying for gas (not to mention wear and tear).

HOUSING- Yes, we told employees that they would stay in a hotel or motel, but accepted the invite of staying at the dorms (and a big thanks goes out for that offer) because of the logistics involved. The closer the employees are to the jobsite, the easier transportation is and the more down time they can have instead of sitting in a vehicle for long periods of time. During the Katrina clean-up, the closest place to house some of our people was over 2 hours each way! FEMA, local residents and contractors took every other room available, although many hotels and motels were closed anyway due to damaged incurred during that storm. We are in the process of finding more hotel rooms, apartments and houses to rent for our fine employees.

WORKERS- Each and every employee that works for us have their paperwork and applications processed in accordance with US Department of Labor guidelines.

Because of the difference of Iowa's minimum wage and the national minimum wage, there was a breakdown when setting up these different jobsites. This was not an attempt to circumvent Iowa's minimum wage, but a clerical error that has been fixed. Employees time keeping records are kept by the company that we are supplying people to and then verified by our supervisors. If someone feels that they have been shorted pay, we make every effort to resolve the matter quickly and to their satisfaction.

SAFETY EQUIPMENT- We would and will never purposely put someone in harms way. We have been doing our best to

procure additonal gloves, hard hats and boots for our employees. We had to go all the way to the east coast just to find things such as gloves. The workers in the area are provided PPE (personal protective equipment) that relates to the job task that they are performing. We would not put an employee in an "at risk" situation without providing the proper equipment, EVER! The cost of an employee that would need to be seen at a hospital would far outweigh the revenue that a worker could generate for the company. Will there be accidents and injuries, yes, but the fine staff at St. Lukes Cedar Rapid have done a remarkable job about giving our injured workers some of the best care available.

FINAL THOUGHT- As a native Floridian I have been in my fair share of hurricanes, so when Katrina hit I never expected the type of devastation I witnessed when I travelled to the gulf coast region. Some things you cannot imagine unless seen with you own eyes. We, as a company, had never seen this type of flooding until we arrived on-site. As the poster Kevin said, sometimes you do not know what you need until you get there. That was truly the case in this situation. We strive to be an employer that does our best to handle each situation correctly, sometimes it does not happen from the get go, but we do and will always do the things to make it right. We are not the only temporary service on-site providing employees (just the only company mentioned in the article) to these contractors, but I assure you that each question that is raised, or concern that is brought forward is addressed with the utmost urgency.

**Posted By:** Hugs4u      **Post Date:** 06/22/08 10:04:00 PM

**Title:** Kevin Sanderson

We just had a big raid of illegal workers at Agriprocessors, Inc in Postville, Iowa.  
The reason they used for having illegals was "They could not get local people that wanted to work there."  
The truth is they could not get local people to work for there for substandard wages and working conditions, so they imported illegals who would.  
Not saying the cleaning company is using illegals but they sure are using imported help that appears was hired off the street elsewhere and imported here. Working for substandard pay and substandard equipment.

**Posted By:** Kevin Sanderson      **Post Date:** 06/22/08 04:08:00 PM

**Title:** The mobb mentality of Iowa

It's amazing how quickly all of you judge without any regard.  
You all pile on like on a mobb on the very people who are trying to help you. Yes they make money but do you not think that they hold high regard that they helped people in need? If you don't you are as naive as you all sound to be. Ever heard the term "beggars can't be choosers?". You beg and plead for help and then when help arrives you tear them apart like hungry lions. No thank you's, No we appreciate what your doing, just a big middle finger and ridicule. Great example you are setting.

No one is perfect, No company is perfect. You people who judge and claim that company as vile are not perfect. Do you all believe everything you read in the paper/news? It looks to be that way. Otherwise you would have taken it upon yourself to find all of the facts before you past judgement. Things you read and see can be deceiving. I'm sure One Source did their best to prepare their people and give them what they were able to provide for safety until additional supplies could be shipped in.

Having gone into various disaster sites I can tell you that you have no idea what you will need until you get there. Could One Source have done a better job of getting safety supplies to their people. Yes. Do some of these people who say they were promised one thing and were given another possibly have a reason to be dishonest or are possibly confused? Yes.

Just because a company drops the ball on one job does not mean that they deserve to be shut down. If we shut down every company that dropped the ball and prosecuted every individual who ever failed to do something you all would not be sitting in your chair passing judgement but would rather be in an empty space with absolutely nothing because EVERY company on the planet has dropped the ball on more than one occassion. You have done the same.

People make mistakes. We are all human. Learn it. Accept it.

**Posted By:** Debra Rexroat      **Post Date:** 06/22/08 01:19:00 PM

**Title:** Humane treatment should trump disaster

To hear a company that is supposed to specialize in mobilizing workers following disasters making excuses for the lack of minimum standards for their temporary workers is criminal. It harkens memories of President Bush reminding us time and time again just how very HARD his job is! Don't whine to the workers or the good people of Cedar Rapids about how much it costs to house and feed the people they are relying on to leave their flood-ravaged community clean and sanitary! Not paying fair wages, providing adequate rest and some measure of comfort for the workers is like a building contractor substituting bad materials for good because the price of lumber is higher than expected.

...

If a worker is bused for over two hours each way and works a 12 hour day, that leaves less than 8 hours for sleep, showering and relaxation time. I wonder how many of these workers we WON'T hear about who have fallen ill in the months to come after being exposed to toxins, disease, filth . . . and all without adequate safety gear. Masks, gloves and foot gear should be a given . . . and no worker should be forced to work without them if they have exposure to the residue left by the flood waters.

...

I was dismayed to hear that it is possible that one disaster may be followed up by another . . . the loss of integrity by those who claim to be coming in to aid those who have lost everything. How soon we will be hearing that the money promised by our government is failing to reach the empty pocketbooks of those for whom it was intended?

...

This just makes a bad situation that much more unbearable.

**Posted By:** Hugs4u      **Post Date:** 06/22/08 07:35:00 AM

**Title:** dean tangeman

I tend to believe you are lying thorough your teeth. If the workers are so experinced, Why is their story so much different then yours., It seems this is the first taste of a clean up job they have been on, and also if they are So experinced, why are they not wearing protective equipment like rubber boots and gloves and hadn't already have had their tetanus shot. You sir are a shyster trying to get rich off others misfortune while putting your workers in unsafe circumstance for your personal gain while endangering their lives for peanuts. Like another poster stated. How do you sleep at night. Also you stated that locals were welcome to join in helping. Haven't seen any want ads by your company anywhere.

Deans says

Our workers are skilled in this industry, and companies want people who know what they're doing and have the experience to back it up. As for our pay and per diem arrangements, we make it very clear what the workers pay is, the daily deductions, the daily per diem, and what's included in our contract. We do charge for our transportation, workers says

She said workers, who are primarily African-American and Hispanic, told her they were not given tetanus shots. They told her they earn less than Iowa's minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, plus \$15 daily for food and expenses, and have to pay for gas for the bus to Cedar Rapids.

Workers said they were told they would stay in a hotel, and the company would provide free transportation.

**Posted By:** E. Smith      **Post Date:** 06/22/08 12:55:00 AM

**Title:** DISASTER PROFITEERS!

Here to profit from the misfortune of others.... I wonder how the sleep at night?... probably on a really big pile of money!

**Posted By:** dean tangeman      **Post Date:** 06/21/08 11:39:00 PM

**Title:** Treatment of Workers

First off, I want to let you know that this is OneSource management responding. We have never been contacted for a comment or response, and when this interview took place, I was there. I was never asked to respond to anything, or for even our side of the story. Catastrophe events are hard on everyone, more so on the victims of the catastrophic event, but also on the companies that offer help or support. We have tried to do the very best we can and offer as many workers as the communitie's need to restore order. In our industry, there are many companies that hire local help, but we do this sort of thing all year round. Our workers are skilled in this industry, and companies want people who know what they're doing and have the experience to back it up. As for our pay and per diem arrangements, we make it very clear what the workers pay is, the daily deductions, the daily per diem, and what's included in our contract. We do charge for our transportation, and this is very common in our industry. Everyone is told that they will get daily per diem and lodging will be provided. We always want to provide a hotel room, it's more suitable to resting and recovering. However, when you have hundreds of people in the area cleaning up, and the local residents have been tragically driven out of their homes and into hotels, many times, there are no rooms available and we have to find other means. We have even rented 20 apartments in the area. We welcome local residents to come and help clean up their cities, and we are just here to offer that additional support. Mass numbers of people are needed, because businesses lose thousands of dollars every day that aren't open for business, so we try and help get them operational again. We commute up to an hour and a half every morning, and every night. We would love to pay for a hotel room every night, but thank you for Cornell for opening up their dorm to us and in turn, allowing a hundred or so workers to be able to work. Without housing, we can't supply workers. Situations are difficult, and there are definitely challenges. Safety and overall security is of the utmost importance to us. Our workers have had their shot, and as soon as we hear of an injury, we immediatly get them to a clinic, or in some cases, a hospital. As for the number of hours and days worked, most of our workers want to work 7 days a week and get 12 hours a day. They earn a lot of overtime pay. We can't always offer the perfect situation, and many times, there are unforeseen challenges, that test your very core. I would just ask you to please be understanding of the difficult nature that we face. We are not the kind of company that is staying in luxurious hotels or nice homes. We are camped out with our people to offer support, deal with challenges, and answer questions. Our company prides itself on our workforce, and it's very difficult to make everyone happy, and to offer a perfect situation. I could never promise to do so. A catastrophe event is called that for a reason. Sometimes the catastrophe is not allowing grace to those trying to help.

**Posted By:** Mr Pickles      **Post Date:** 06/21/08 11:01:00 PM

**Title:** R.e. Kevin

Kevin,  
It's obvious that we have much more than 5% of "the information" regarding this situation. It is quite fair...and necessary for that matter to scrutinize One Source and verify they are treating their employees in a humane, safe and equitable fashion. If you look at the facts in this case it is apparent that there was a degree of unsatisfactory conditions that these employees were being put through that were bordering on usury. I applaud Cornell for stepping in and holding One Source accountable.

**Posted By:** Kevin Sanderson      **Post Date:** 06/21/08 10:18:00 PM

**Title:** restoration in disaster areas

Having worked for several restoration companies I can tell you that it does occur that you are not completely prepared for everything before people are sent to a disaster site. You are required to have a certain # of people at the location generally within a 12-24 hr timeframe. When your company is based in a completely different state what do you think is more logical.. bring your own people or hope and pray you can find people who are able to work in the area where the disaster occured and most people are displaced??





**Title:** I'd be upset if it was me...

I think it is positively appalling that these folks are treated like this, to be promised one thing and given another.