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Harkin expresses concern over handling of Swift raid

By KEN BLACK

Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, Tuesday called for a complete overhaul of the nation's immigration system, while the Times-Republican is calling for a federal summit on the issue to be held in Marshalltown.

In the wake of the recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids on Swift & Co., Harkin sent a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to express concern about alleged humanitarian and civil rights abuses against detainees, and to urge the agency's cooperation with Congress in implementing comprehensive immigration reform.

"I continue to be concerned that the process in the wake of such raids lacks transparency and is being conducted without even the most basic fairness," Harkin wrote in the letter to Chertoff.

In the letter, Harkin points to reports that the hotline by which family members and others were supposed to obtain information about detainees and their status had gone unanswered at times by ICE officials, and at other times provided no information of any use. He singled out the difficulty detainees had in accessing legal or religious counsel.

Harkin also expressed his dissatisfaction that, despite assurances provided to his staff that any individuals with small children who would otherwise go without care would be released to make alternative arrangements, there were repeated reports of numerous single mothers remaining in custody.

Harkin closed his letter highlighting the urgent need for Congress to move forward with "comprehensive reform to our antiquated immigration system."

Comprehensive reform must include increased security at our borders and a means to legal citizenship for immigrants already in the country, Harkin stated, which would consist of fines, learning English, passing a background check and paying back taxes.

Marshalltown was one of six sites around the country to get raided by federal officials last week, but was the only one in the state of Iowa. A federal summit on the issue would be especially valuable if it were held in Marshalltown because of the city's experiences with immigrant populations.

"Having key decision makers here and having them listen to what the Hispanic community, city/county government, the schools, the hospital, the business community, the chamber, MEDIC and other agencies have to say about immigration should prove to be valuable for those making policy," said Times-Republican Publisher Mike Schlesinger. "This would also give those leaders a chance to hear from those who are directly impacted by the kind of ill-advised raids like was done here and what they hear could help formulate an immigration policy that would stop splitting families, provide workers for businesses and implement a procedure for workers who are here without proper documents to arrange for some type of retribution but still be able to obtain necessary documents through legal means that ultimately leads to citizenship."

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