Advocates hope focus on 'essential' workers improves conditions at meatpacking plants. But the system may be tough to change.

Grand Island — As dozens of her coworkers at the JBS USA meatpacking plant tested positive for COVID-19 last spring, Graciela Billington continued clocking in.

Masks were so scarce that workers were told to bring their own, and supervisors didn't tell workers if their colleagues had gotten sick, which she said added to her anxiety. But Billington was supporting her children in Grand Island and her mother and siblings in Panama, who had lost their jobs in the pandemic. She also hated seeing the empty refrigerated cases at her local grocery store.

"I said, 'I'm going to work. Maybe Walmart will have meat next week,'" she said. "It was kind of cool, because I was part of that."

Billington was one of nearly 500,000 essential workers nationwide who kept shelves stocked with T-bones, pork loins and chicken filets, despite the risks. COVID tore through dozens of the plants, including JBS's massive Grand Island facility, where more than 230 workers tested positive for the coronavirus by mid-April. Fully staffed, the plant can accommodate 3,600 workers. Billington did not contract the virus.

Critics say JBS and other meatpackers were slow to protect workers, what they see as an outgrowth of a culture that emphasizes production over safety. Now, worker advocates are pushing for new protections to reduce both the risks from the coronavirus and the high rate of injuries that plagued workers long before the pandemic.

Notre Dame historian Joshua Specht thinks the meatpacking industry may be tough to reform. Credit: University of Notre Dame.

If Billington's story hints at a need for change, however, it also highlights the potential difficulty in realizing it. Meatpacking companies have spent decades creating a highly efficient system with a singular focus of providing consumers with safe and inexpensive food.

A heavier government hand could lead to higher prices for consumers or backlogs and headaches for ranchers, which happened last spring when the pandemic forced some plants to shut down temporarily.

"Our meat system is incredibly good at what it does, which is providing vast quantities of meat at very low prices," said Joshua Specht, a University of Notre Dame history professor who specializes in the meatpacking industry. "Any sort of shock threatens to push it offline."

'Better than some'

JBS didn't respond to multiple requests for comment. It says it adopted a series of changes to reduce the risks of infection. It takes employee temperatures before workers enter facilities and has spaced areas out in breakrooms and cafeterias to allow for more social distancing. It also added plastic dividers to separate workers on production lines.

JBS has also offered a $100 bonus to workers who get vaccinated, and the company gave time off at full pay to older workers and pregnant women more at risk from the coronavirus.

Eric Reeder, president of United Commercial Food Workers Local 293, which represents meatpacking workers in Nebraska, said while companies were slow to react to the pandemic, JBS, which is unionized, did "better than most" in adding safeguards.

The North American Meat Institute, which represents JBS, Tyson Foods, and other producers, said the industry has spent $1.5 billion in total in response to the pandemic.

It notes that the rates of infection among workers, after spiking in the spring, have fallen below the national averages. The group also did not return a call seeking comment.

JBS Grand Island plant. Credit: The Independent.

'Callous disregard'

Labor rights groups are working toward two goals. In Washington and state capitals like Lincoln they're pressing to meet the immediate threat COVID still poses to meatpacking workers and for a more rigorous regulatory system that reduces injuries and illnesses that occur more frequently at meat and poultry facilities than other workplaces.

In Nebraska, state Sen. Tony Vargas, a Democrat, is pushing a bill to require six feet of space between workers, face masks that are replaced daily, and paid time off for workers to get tested and to recover if they have the virus.

More than 7,000 packing plant employees in the state have tested positive for COVID, 255 have been hospitalized, and 27 have died, according to Vargas's office. Nationwide, at least 249 deaths have been reported at meat and poultry plants.

"Those numbers make it very clear that more can and should be done," said Vargas, whose father died in New York City last year from COVID.

Worker groups want the Biden administration to add teeth to coronavirus guidelines developed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). A temporary emergency standard is expected to require companies to develop specific response plans to the pandemic, with contributions from workers.

Advocates also want more federal inspectors overseeing the industry and slower line speeds to reduce the risks of musculoskeletal disorders like carpal tunnel syndrome to workers who eviscerate, cut, chop and lift for hours on end.

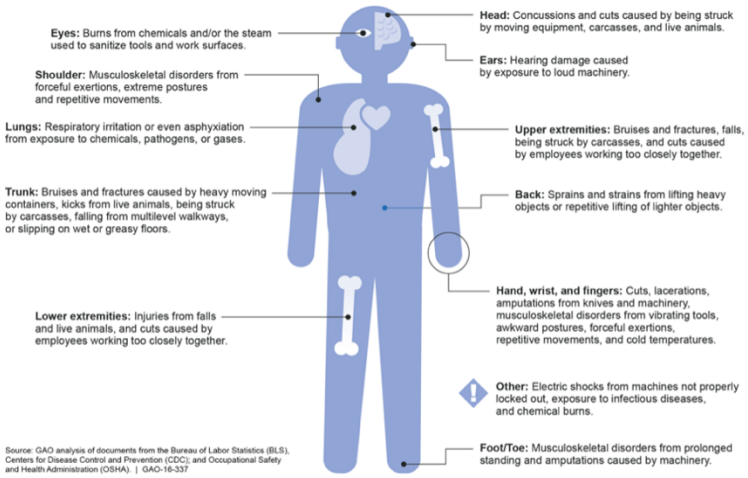
Nebraska state Sen. Tony Vargas has pushed legislation to provide more protections for meatpacking workers. Credit: Nebraska Legislature.

Poor safety culture

The spring outbreaks were an extension of a system that hadn't placed sufficient value in the health of employees, labor advocates say.

"If there was more of a focus on safety rather than on fast, quick production, the workers would have fared quite a bit better," said Athena Ramos, an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center's College of Public Health who has studied the industry.

Ramos led a group of UNMC researchers who interviewed meatpacking workers in Omaha in the months immediately prior to the pandemic. Workers complained of being treated like machines and said they felt powerless to improve the conditions under which they labored. The industry suffered from a "poor safety culture," the study concluded.



A graphic on the health risks to meatpacking and poultry workers included in a Government Accountability Office report on the industry in 2016.

Meatpacking plants report 4.3 cases of work-related injuries per 100 workers, compared to rate of 3.1 cases across all industries. In Nebraska, which slaughters more cattle than any other state, the injury rate was higher: 6.5 cases per 100 workers, the study said.

Workers can sustain crippling injuries by repeating the same motions that strain tendons and muscles.

A 2016 Government Accountability Office report said that while injury and illness rates had decreased from 2004-2013, workers still faced "numerous hazards," including slippery floors, high-speed repetitive tasks, and exposure to hazardous chemicals. The report also said that injuries were likely underreported by companies.

Human Rights Watch, in a 2019 report on the industry, said disabling illnesses were "alarmingly common" among the 50 meatpacking workers it interviewed, including in Nebraska.

Changes 'slow to happen'

COVID presented a new order of challenges. Workers packed together on production lines in cold settings for long hours, doing work that makes mask wearing difficult, eased transmission of the virus, the Centers for Disease Control said.

A study by researchers from Columbia University and the University of Chicago found that as much as 8% of the cases in the U.S. during the first five months could be tied to livestock and poultry processing plants. Meatpacking workers accounted for 20% of cases in Nebraska over the first months of the pandemic, Vargas said.

In Grand Island, Dr. Rebecca Steinke was one of the first to notice an uptick in cases tied to the plant last March at the first at the family clinic where she works. She said she and officials from the local health department advised JBS officials to stagger production lines to allow for more spacing between employees and to make masks mandatory at the plant by early April.

But the changes were "slow to happen," she said.

"I am certain that the plant and our community would have seen fewer overall cases if this large employer had implemented precautions sooner," she said in an email.

Dr. Rebecca Steinke says JBS was slow to react to virus. Credit: The Independent.

Civil unrest

Nebraska Appleseed, a worker advocacy group based in Lincoln, and other organizations pushed Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts to close meatpacking plants to allow for new safeguards to be implemented in an April 28 letter. Ricketts, a Republican, by then had directed the plants in the state to stay open, even as they were closed in other states, including JBS's plant in Greeley, Colorado.

It was "vitally important" to "do everything we can to ensure the supply chain, because we would have civil unrest if that was not the case," he said.

By late March meat prices were rising, by 25% at one point, and there was a growing fear of meat shortages.

In late April President Trump issued an executive order directing the plants to stay open, noting the importance of maintaining the supply of protein. An investigation by ProPublica said the order emphasized points that the industry had stressed in correspondence with administration officials.

Bloody masks

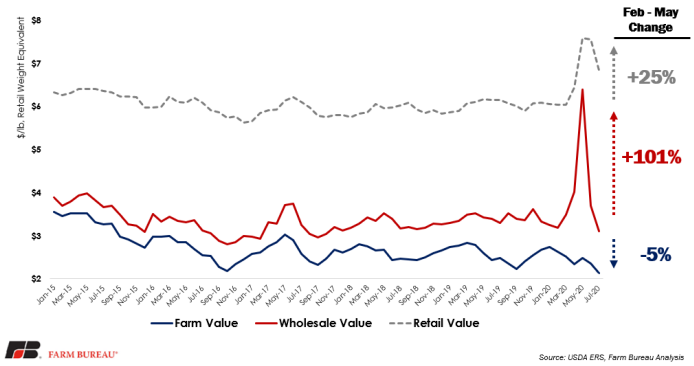
As companies like JBS tried to maintain production and update their facilities to meet the new threat, workers continued to get sick and report issues with the implementation of new safeguards.

A former JBS worker told the Nebraska Business and Labor Committee at an August hearing on Vargas's meatpacking bill, which failed to advance that session, that his mask would become bloody by mid-shift and wasn't replaced.

Billington, who is now a walking steward for Local 293, told the committee that workers at the plant were expected to "do the work of two people" because of absences, adding strain to already difficult jobs.

In a separate interview, another worker, who asked not to be identified for fear of retaliation, said an employee in the human resources department refused to give him a mask as he entered the plant in April because his job was largely outdoors. The worker said he still had to walk through a crowded breakroom.

Figure 1. Beef Retail, Wholesale, and Farm Values



Prices rose as meat plants shut down last spring.

While he eventually got a mask that day, it was four days before he got another one.

He's convinced he contracted the virus at the plant, which sent him the hospital for a week. The worker still gets short of breath and needs oxygen from time to time. He says he's unlikely to return to work and money is tight.

A UNMC survey of more than 600 workers in May sought to measure the extent to which companies were implementing safety precautions. Most meatpackers in Nebraska by then were checking the temperatures of employees and requiring masks, the survey found.

Fewer than half were implementing costlier measures, like slowing production lines, increasing the number of shifts, and providing workers with paid time off.

"The things that are most effective were the things least likely to be implemented," Ramos said.

Bonus pay

JBS has said it allowed workers to stay home without penalty, but many felt pressured to come in, by circumstance if nothing else, advocates and workers said.

Workers “wanted to stay away, but they needed the money,” said Gleibis Rodriguez, an organizer with Heartland Workers Center and a Cuban immigrant. A dentist in her home country, Rodriguez worked for two years at McCain Foods USA, another food processing plant in Grand Island, before becoming a labor organizer.

JBS last spring offered a bonus to workers to come in, which some community leaders said encouraged more risk taking.

“Offering a bonus to stay at work while a number of their workers were home sick, I didn’t think that was a good thing to do morally,” said the Rev. Jim Golka, whose congregation at St. Mary’s Cathedral in Grand Island includes a number of JBS employees.

Golka said 12 of his parishioners – all Hispanic – died during a three-week period in April. Several of the people had connections to the JBS plant, he said. Workers who attend his church told him that they didn’t feel safe going to work in the spring but did anyway.

One worker caught a bad case and was near death on a ventilator. The worker recovered but was so anxious about returning to work that he stopped to receive a blessing on his way back into the plant, Golka said.

Rare opportunity

Asma Ahmed, who works at JBS and is a member of the union, sees the job as a means to an end: she can earn enough to help pay to go to school for social work in the evenings. JBS offers a rare opportunity for immigrants, she said.

“Nowhere else is going to compensate you if you don’t speak English or don’t write English or understand English,” she said. “People feel like they don’t have any other option than JBS.”

Ahmed, who speaks English well, moved from Kenya to Texas when she was 13 before moving to Grand Island. She said she didn’t see bloody masks, and she credited JBS for allowing workers to miss work without penalty.

Beyond the money, there’s also satisfaction of providing for the community, as Billington said in explaining why she continued to go to work.

Carmen Perez, a business agent for Local 293 in Grand Island, said workers deserve the community’s thanks.

"They are essential workers," Perez said. "The community really need them, and there were quite a few people who did step up."

Vulnerable population

Industry experts said workers likely will need help in advocating for more protections and better benefits. The makeup of the workforce limits its power as a political constituency, said Specht, the Notre Dame historian. According to the Economic Policy Institute, nearly 40% of the workers in the industry are immigrants. Some are undocumented.

Meatpackers "employ relatively vulnerable populations of people, people who aren't going to push for their rights and also might feel pressure to keep working, even if they feel sick," Specht said.

Workers in the industry made significant strides after World War II. But as plants consolidated and moved from the cities to rural areas where labor unions were weaker, gains made over the decades fell away.

Wages entered a period of "total stagnation," Specht said. Industry wide pay was less than $15 an hour in 2019, which is 44% lower than the manufacturing average, according to the Human Rights Watch report.

JBS, which is unionized, pays more. Ahmed said her starting wage was around $16 an hour but that new workers now make $18, which is double the minimum wage in Nebraska.

Empowering OSHA

Marcy Goldstein-Gelb, who is the co-executive director of the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, a labor rights group, said it is crucial that workers, many of whom are immigrants, have a seat at the table.

The group is pushing for more collective bargaining agreements, which set pay and benefits and can also establish maximum line speeds.

"It means that you can identify and speak up about dangers," she said.

Another focus for worker advocates is on replenishing the roster of inspectors at OSHA.

A report from the National Employment Law Project, a New York-based group that has criticized the industry's response to the coronavirus, found that the number of inspectors at

OSHA had dropped to the lowest level since 1975, and 42% of the top leadership positions were unfilled.

In fiscal year 2020, OSHA conducted 35% fewer workplace inspections.

"There are serious challenges in terms of the capacity for the regulatory state to do anything," Specht said. "That would need to change."

When OSHA has investigated, the penalties it administers are often insignificant. Goldstein-Gelb said it may also take an act of Congress to give OSHA the authority to impose stiffer penalties.

Labor advocates are also pressing for ergonomics standards to address the high rates of musculoskeletal disorders that workers contract. But lawmakers have blocked efforts previous efforts at OSHA to regulate line speeds, which are now regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture as part of its oversight of plant sanitation.

Specht said the industry is particularly sensitive to line-speed changes because labor productivity is one of the main levers it has to increase profits. The nature of the work is resistant to more automation — animal bodies are too variable to replace workers with robots — and input costs are relatively stable.

Slowing down a line is "totally antithetical to how the system works," he said. "Slowing it down also creates all sorts of bottlenecks and problems across the whole supply chain."

'Decades in the making'

Lourdes Gouveia, a sociologist who has studied the meatpacking industry, said in a Facebook talk on essential workers that was sponsored by the University of Nebraska Omaha's Office of Latino/Latin American Studies, that major changes to meatpacking operations are unlikely, even after a year that has spotlighted a number of examples of mistreatment.

"Workers lack sufficient power to command them, governments intervene mainly on behalf of the industry, and the majority of the American public continues to be either too detached from the lives of these workers, or outright unsympathetic to their plight," said Gouveia, who is now a visiting professor at the University of Kansas.

The COVID crisis in slaughterhouses was a "crisis decades in the making," Specht said.

The dynamics that drove it — vulnerable population of workers, a supply chain that doesn't allow for much slack, consumer indifference — won't be easily overcome.

"I feel like there is a risk of us moving on and forgetting about these people," said Reeder, the union president. "It's an industry that is open to a lot of abuse, and I'm hopeful that people will recognize that."