Advocates hope new focus on 'essential' workers will improve conditions in meatpacking plants

Grand Island, Neb. — As the virus spread through the JBS meatpacking plant last spring, Graciela Billington kept going to work.

Masks were scarce. Workers were often left to guess who among them had gotten sick. Each shift carried a new layer of uncertainty. But Billington had little choice. She was supporting her children in Nebraska and sending money home to family in Panama, where the pandemic had wiped out jobs.

And there was something else.

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

She was. Billington was one of hundreds of thousands of workers who kept the country's food supply intact as COVID-19 tore through meatpacking plants. In Grand Island alone, more than 230 workers at the JBS facility tested positive by mid-April. Nationwide, outbreaks linked to slaughterhouses became some of the earliest and most alarming signs of how exposed "essential" workers really were.

Billington never got sick. But what she saw — and what followed — has fueled a growing push to rethink the conditions inside plants like the one where she still works.

Whether that push leads to lasting change is another question.

For decades, the U.S. meatpacking industry has been built around a simple goal: produce large quantities of meat quickly and cheaply. It has been remarkably successful. Grocery stores are reliably stocked. Prices remain relatively low. The system hums.

But it leaves little room for disruption.

"Our meat system is incredibly good at what it does," said Joshua Specht, a historian at the University of Notre Dame who studies the industry. "Any sort of shock threatens to push it offline."

COVID was that shock.

As infections surged last spring, plants struggled to adapt. Workers stood shoulder to shoulder on production lines. Cold environments and long shifts made distancing difficult and mask-wearing inconsistent. In Grand Island, local doctors urged the plant to stagger lines and require face coverings early on. Changes came, but slowly, one physician said — too slowly to prevent widespread transmission.

The consequences rippled far beyond the factory floor.

As plants closed or scaled back, meat prices spiked — at one point rising by as much as 25%. Ranchers faced bottlenecks. Policymakers warned of supply shortages. In April, Donald Trump issued an executive order directing plants to remain open, citing the need to maintain the nation's protein supply.

Nebraska's governor, Pete Ricketts, had already made a similar calculation.

"We would have civil unrest" if the supply chain broke down, he said at the time.

Inside the plants, the experience was more immediate.

Workers described masks that weren't replaced, crowded break rooms and longer shifts as absenteeism rose. One former employee told lawmakers his mask would be soaked with blood halfway through a shift. Another said he was denied a mask on entry and later spent a week hospitalized with COVID-19. He still struggles to breathe.

Billington, now a union steward, said workers were often expected to do "the work of two people."

Advocates argue those conditions weren't new — just newly visible.

"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, a public health researcher at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Even before the pandemic, meatpacking ranked among the more dangerous industrial jobs. Injury rates exceed the national average. Workers repeat the same cutting and lifting motions for hours, leading to chronic pain and long-term disability. Federal reports have cited hazards ranging from slippery floors to chemical exposure, and studies suggest injuries are often underreported.

COVID layered a new risk onto an already strained system.

A study later estimated that as much as 8% of U.S. COVID cases in the early months of the pandemic could be linked to meat and poultry plants. In Nebraska, packinghouse workers accounted for a disproportionate share of infections.

The question now is what to do about it.

Worker advocates are pushing on multiple fronts. In Nebraska, state Sen. Tony Vargas has proposed legislation requiring greater spacing between workers, daily mask replacements and paid leave for testing and recovery.

At the federal level, labor groups want stronger enforcement from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration — more inspectors, clearer standards and penalties that carry real weight.

They are also pressing for slower production line speeds, arguing that reducing pace would lower both injury rates and the spread of illness.

That may be the hardest ask of all.

Line speed is one of the industry's most important economic levers. Slow it down, and costs rise. Bottlenecks ripple through the supply chain. Prices follow.

"Slowing it down is totally antithetical to how the system works," Specht said.

Even reforms that seem modest — more inspections, stricter rules — face practical limits. Federal oversight has thinned over time. The number of OSHA inspectors has fallen to its lowest level in decades, and inspections dropped sharply during the pandemic.

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

There is also the question of who holds power.

Nearly 40% of meatpacking workers are immigrants, many of them in precarious economic or legal situations. The jobs are physically demanding but relatively accessible, offering steady pay to people who may have few other options.

Asma Ahmed, who works at the Grand Island plant, sees it that way. The job is a stepping stone — a way to pay for school and build something better.

"Nowhere else is going to compensate you if you don't speak English," she said. "People feel like they don't have any other option."

That dynamic can make collective action difficult. Workers may be reluctant to speak up or risk losing their jobs, even under dangerous conditions.

It also helps explain why, despite decades of organizing, wages have stagnated. Industry pay remains well below the broader manufacturing average.

For all that, the sense of purpose Billington described hasn't disappeared.

There is pride in the work — in keeping food on shelves, in supporting families, in showing up when others stayed home.

"They are essential workers," said Carmen Perez, a union representative. "The community really needs them."

That recognition — briefly front and center in the early months of the pandemic — is what advocates hope to build on.

But history suggests change will be slow.

The forces that shaped the industry — a vulnerable workforce, relentless pressure for efficiency, and a public accustomed to cheap meat — have been in place for decades.

“The crisis was decades in the making,” Specht said.

And as the pandemic fades, there is a risk that so will the urgency.

“I feel like there is a risk of us moving on and forgetting about these people,” said Eric Reeder, a union leader in Nebraska.

Back on the line in Grand Island, the system is running again — fast, efficient and, in many ways, unchanged.