

287 workers test positive for COVID-19 at meatpacking plant as impact ripples through northern Utah



(Screenshot via Google Earth) The JBS meat-processing plant in Hyrum. An outbreak of the coronavirus has been linked to the plant in early June.



By Nate Carlisle



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Jasmine Morales' father was notified Saturday that he had tested positive for COVID-19.

On Monday, Morales said, her dad received a phone call saying he is to report to work Wednesday at the JBS Beef Plant in Hyrum.

“They just don’t care,” Morales said. “They know [he tested positive]. They have the information on hand.”

Nikki Richardson, a spokeswoman for JBS, based in Greeley, Colo., insisted that the company does not want sick employees coming to work.

“No one is forced to come to work, and no one is punished for being absent for health reasons,” she wrote in an email. If someone is made to come to work sick, “that would be a clear violation of our policy and culture, which puts team member health and

safety first.”

The Bear River Health Department confirmed Monday that 287 workers at the northern Utah meatpacking plant, which employs about 1,400 people, have tested positive for the coronavirus. The number could be higher if employees sought testing on their own, said department spokesman Josh Greer.

The facility remains partially open, according to a company spokeswoman. Greer said the department cannot shut it down because of an executive order signed by President Donald Trump making meatpacking plants an essential business.

“We do not have the ability to close them down because of that executive order,” Greer said. “It’s under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.”

It became clear Monday that the outbreak there was impacting life in northern Utah as much as — if not more than — when the pandemic arrived in the state in March.

While Morales and her family worried about whether they would receive paychecks, social service providers in Cache County began a new push to give food to families with a loved one employed at the plant. Logan, the county’s biggest city and home to Utah State University’s main campus, announced it would try to stifle the spread by closing the library and recreation center it reopened just days ago.

‘We have a serious spike’

Logan Mayor Holly Daines urged her constituents not to grow complacent toward the virus.

“It’s been easy for everyone to relax and say, ‘Oh, we’re good,’ ” Daines said Monday, “and at least in the case of Cache County, we have a serious spike again that we’re having to deal with.”

Public health officials in Utah have not acknowledged the JBS plant is the source of an outbreak, but the information was an open secret Monday among people in Cache County. The Bear River Health District, which includes Cache, Box Elder and Rich counties, had 117 confirmed coronavirus cases May 28. On Sunday, the number was 782. Of those, 731 were in Cache County.

Maggie Mann, director of Southeastern Idaho Public Health, said she is aware of one positive case connected to the plant within the eight Gem State counties her department serves.

Richardson, the JBS spokeswoman, wrote in an email that the Hyrum plant “is open at a reduced capacity.” It normally processes 3,500 animals a day.

Employees are being screened for coronavirus symptoms and have been issued personal protective equipment. JBS is following all federal health and workplace safety guidelines, Richardson said, including providing extra spacing for employees and taking extra steps to sanitize the plant. Workers at high risk from the virus have been removed from the plant and have been offered “full pay and benefits.”

‘Hearing both sides’

Morales’ father and sister-in-law both work at the plant. Morales said the plant had a few positive cases weeks ago, but they apparently didn’t lead to a widespread outbreak. JBS gave employees face shields and other protective gear, she said, and tried to provide spacing within the plant.

In early May, Morales said, her sister-in-law was sent home from work because she is pregnant, and thus was considered high risk if she contracted the virus. Her father, who has diabetes and will turn 63 on Wednesday — the day he was told to return to his job — continued work in butchering until last week.

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(Courtesy Jasmine Morales) Jasmine Morales, who is due to give birth in mid-June, said her father tested positive for COVID-19. He works at the JBS Beef Plant in Hyrum, Utah.

After Memorial Day, when coronavirus cases began spiking across Utah, an outbreak erupted at the Hyrum plant. Morales said her father was tested May 30 and was not allowed to return to work at least until the results came back. He received his positive result Saturday.

Richardson noted that if someone tested positive May 30, then returning to work Wednesday would be within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Those guidelines say to remain in isolation for 10 days. Workers then can leave self-quarantine if they have gone 72 hours without exhibiting any symptoms.

Greer said Bear River Health has heard reports that positive or sick employees are being told to report to work.

“We’re hearing both sides,” Greer said. JBS is “saying, ‘Nope, nope we’re not letting sick people work.’ And then we’re hearing they are letting sick people work.”

Another woman who said a family member she lives with also works a night shift at the plant, and who asked not to be identified because she fears repercussions from JBS and her own employer, said he had coronavirus symptoms for a week. He

reported those to his supervisor, the woman said, and the boss kept telling him he could get a test tomorrow.

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It wasn't until the woman intervened Friday to explain to the supervisor that her family member was getting worse, that the supervisor authorized a test on company time and expense. The woman's relative received his positive result Monday.

She is unsure if her relative will be paid while he's sick. Another relative, with whom she does not live, also works at the plant and was in quarantine for two weeks after coming into contact with an employee who had tested positive. He never tested positive, the woman said, and wasn't paid for his time away from work.

She's not mad at JBS — just the supervisors at the plant.

“It's the actual people working there,” she said, “the people in high-up positions.”

Language barriers

Morales said there are hardly any white workers at the plant. The employees tend to be immigrants from Latin America, Asia and Africa who can't work from home.

“They're not fluent in English, and so they do production work,” Morales said, “and that's where [JBS] takes advantage of the community.”

After word spread of the outbreak at the JBS plant, Morales said, her mother and brother were sent home from their jobs in Logan and Sunset. She said the employers were worried they had been infected, too.

Morales, 31, who is due to give birth next week, said she isn't sure if her father, mother or brother will be paid while they are absent from work. The uncertainty is adding to everyone's stress.

“I understand [the pandemic is] a new thing for everyone,” Morales said, “but I think there should be more humanity and understanding.”

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Officials with the Cache Refugee and Immigrant Connection, or CRIC, expect several hundred more JBS employees to need help with food and critical health items.

“Nine out of 10 households that we serve work in production and processing plants in the valley,” said Jess Lucero, CRIC board president. “And they have been disproportionately affected by the outbreak.”

In most cases, it’s one of the adults in a multigenerational household that has tested positive for COVID-19, Lucero said, “but in some cases both parents have it and the children do as well.”

Single employees who often live together as roommates also have tested positive, she said.

Lucero said that while refugees have shown “strength and resiliency” coming to this country, “they have put themselves on the front lines for our community, and we need to step up to help these families who are in a really tough situation right now.”

Lucero said her organization is collecting cleaning supplies, including bleach, hand soap, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes as well as thermometers and fever-reducing medicines such as acetaminophen.

Donations can be dropped off at the CRIC offices, 93 S. 1250 East, Logan.

For those who cannot contribute in person, they can donate to the drive via the website cacherefugees.org/donate. All donations received until Wednesday will go toward buying needed items for refugees and immigrants.

The Church of God in Hyrum is coordinating delivery of food to families in quarantine and has received thousands of pounds of food from Cache Valley residents and the Bishops’ Storehouse owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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64
T-love8
Lehi, Utah

I have heard the same from my friends there. Not even the paltry 50ish% we see in these parts.

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