

High River outbreak showed workers' vulnerability and resilience

The largest single outbreak of COVID-19 in North America may be one of the biggest lessons in the Catholic social principles of sacrifice, the value of work, care for the common good, and solidarity.

Over 1,500 cases, resulting in three deaths, were linked to the Cargill meat-packing plant at High River in mid-April. Most of the employees were newcomers to Canada: either permanent residents or temporary foreign workers. The crisis situation created strong feelings of being scared, hungry, vulnerable and needing some reassurance.



Ric Morales

“Someone who is sacrificing of their life for another, I look at the workers in a realm that is very close to that,” said Ric Morales, director of community development and integration services for the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, which mobilized teams to help the Cargill workers and their families.

“Here are people going out into a situation that some of them knew could be very risky. You have people who are going out knowing that they have to provide not only for their families in Canada, but there are people from their country of origin that are relying on them.”

For 11 days, roughly 60 CCIS staff, along with volunteers and staff from the Alberta International Medical Graduates Association and Action Dignity, worked remotely with Cargill employees and their families in High River, putting in

extended shifts.

Morales said in a matter of days, cases skyrocketed from the mid-30s to more than 300. Staff, volunteers and other settlement organizations mobilized to provide support, from accessing government help, to culturally appropriate food, to the simple reassurance that they would get through the outbreak together.

CCIS workers were also helping workers and families at the JBS meat-packing plant in Brooks, which initiated a citywide emergency response to a COVID-19 outbreak in that city.

Six months later, CCIS workers are still providing support. For Morales, it's an example of Catholic Social Teaching in action, as Canada's bishops release their own statement asking everyone to reflect on what the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us – and how can continue to care for one another.

Morales will be a part of a COVID-19 panel discussion Nov. 2 on the Value and Dignity of Work.

“Our sole goal was to intervene as quickly as possible, so you wouldn't have the possibility of fatalities or community spread,” Morales said. “You can well imagine the sort of uncertainty that was existing at this time for all those clients. There was a lot of people expressing a lot of fear. This was deemed the single largest national outbreak in Canada.”

“What happened in High River was a perfect example to see the impact on newcomers.”

Canada as a whole has been weathering the storm of COVID-19. According to CCIS workers on-site in High River and Brooks, that pales when compared to what the foreign workers were experiencing.

They worried about food, their jobs, their families, and their own lives.

Some of the workers lived in multi-family homes, and many of them shared commuting to work as a group.

“The irony here is the job is not temporary, but the workers are deemed to be ‘temporary,’” Morales said.

“So they don't have a permanent footprint within their communities. You could see once you have a spread started, how easily it was for that chaos to take place.”

Prior to the suspension of work at the plant, “There were some allegations that some workers felt they had to go to work because the plant was offering them \$500 bonuses,” Morales said.

“A lot of clients were saying they didn't want to, but some felt given the

wages that they were making, \$500 would go a long way. Despite the threat of COVID, some took the risk. For some, one can imagine what the extra income could mean.”

Morales said many however had to make “the choice to stay home for their own personal safety or to go to work.”

The Cargill plant eventually suspended operations, encouraged employees to get tested for COVID-19, and complied with directives from Alberta Health Services prior to opening.

Some of the experiences occurring at this time for the newcomers is that some were reluctant or too humbled to access mainstream social services like a food bank, or unaware how to do it. Others didn’t understand the gravity of the situation and were at times relying on myths as to how to combat the virus.

“COVID is just another layer in coping in a different cultural context. You have people coming with different cultural ways of dealing with outbreaks,” Morales said.

“Some people have a lot of myths about it. We’ll take some ginger. We’ll take some garlic. We’ll take some lime. We’ll have these cures. Some people tend to minimize what was happening. Some people didn’t understand because of the language barriers.”

“At the end of it all, our staff were trying to reassure people that everything is going to be well,” Morales said. “We had to assist people who were dealing with isolation. So there was a great deal of chaos all the while trying to bring some sort of reassurance during that time.”

In High River, Morales said there were also isolated “incidents of shaming and blaming”. Some workers were refused entry into grocery stores or banks, based on their ethnicity, and their employment at Cargill. Conversely, there were also benevolent acts of kindness, as some people offered support and donations were given to the food bank. This was a community whose memories of the 2013 flood was only years ago.

“Community members reached out to our office and said ‘What can I do to help?’” Morales said, noting local school divisions donated money to food banks to help, as did Cargill itself. “That’s one of the teachings that came forward that I saw being demonstrated: empathy, this love for their fellow man.”

Long-term, Morales said the outbreaks in High River and Brooks shone a light on hidden areas.

It highlighted the vulnerability of Canada’s food supply in a province famous for touting its beef, and ironically, it showed the disparity in society, Morales said.

In Alberta it's difficult to know the impact based on race, age, gender, or economic status.

In the U.S., black people are dying at more than twice the rate of whites. In Toronto, visible minorities and households considered low income are much more likely to be COVID-19 cases.

“We're in the same storm but we're in different boats. Some may even be in a yacht. While some are in these little dinghies that's traversing through this storm. You can see how disproportionate, you can see the inequalities in the way sometimes people are impacted through this.”

Working in a meat-packing plant may be seen as a less-than-desirable occupation only left to foreign workers.

It's ironic that “When you take a look at how quickly this industry could be impacted, and you don't have the workers to man those plants, you could see how a way of life could be threatened not only directly to the workers, but to the general public, the agricultural sector,” Morales said.

He noted that COVID-19 proved that [foreign workers] don't have the same level of access to services even though they are critical to keeping Canada fed.

“When you consider the fact that many people went through a whole lot to get to Canada – and then to deal with this – we saw the faith, the resilience of the human being not only in the faces of one of the greatest terrors of their own lives, but they came out and came back with a great deal of humility.

“I think it's a big learning lesson for us all,” Morales said. “They were *essential* workers. They were workers who were providing an essential, stable food product to feed the entire country. It forced us to reassess some those things that we take for granted. We take a look at redefining the value we put around people's jobs.”