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When should coronavirus testing be provided at meat and poultry plants?

‘These people didn’t deserve to get sick,’ says one worker, who adds that the public needs to understand how the deadly contagion can spread among those who labor in close conditions.

By Dianne Solis 3:24 PM on May 21, 2020

As COVID-19 rages across the nation in meat and poultry plants, critical questions have emerged: Who regulates the industry and protects against further infections when an epic pandemic hits? Should testing be required at all plants?

Dallas-area community leaders point to an outbreak at the Brakebush Bros. Inc. poultry plant in Irving when demanding that more be done to slow the disease at meat plants. At least 40 people who work there have been infected, demonstrating, the advocates say, the need for testing at facilities because of the easy, rapid spread of the virus.



The Brakebush Bros. plant, with about 750 employees, in Irving, Texas. (Ryan Michalesko / Staff Photographer)

Brakebush has said workers who aren’t feeling well should alert their supervisors and “seek proper health care.” And it says it has been following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention protocols for how to safely keep the plant operating. But the plant has neither asked for nor received any state help in getting workers tested for the virus at the plant, state officials said. Those who have tested positive sought the testing at medical facilities.

The ZIP code where the plant operates, 75061, now has the second-highest number of coronavirus cases in Dallas County, 331 as of May 19. That surpasses the downtown Dallas ZIP code 75207, where the county jail has had a large outbreak of about 220 cases. ZIP code 75211 in southern Dallas has the most Dallas County cases at 412. Five Brakebush workers who tested positive for COVID-19 live in the 75061 ZIP code, the company said. The company noted that those cases were detected before April 13.

Precautions have been taken, said one worker at the Irving poultry plant, but the effort hasn’t been enough. Despite requirements about washing hands and wearing gloves that were in place long before the arrival of the virus, the worker was infected.

The worker said the public needs to understand how the sometimes deadly contagion can spread among those who labor in close conditions.

“These people didn’t deserve to get sick,” said the worker, who asked not to be named out of concern about keeping a job. “I didn’t deserve to get sick. I went six or seven days without eating. I couldn’t even see straight. My throat was so dry. I didn’t think I was going to make it.”

Then things got worse: The worker infected a family member. That infection spread to a second family member.

Advocates, from churches to union leaders, say the state should be testing people at the plants. Civil rights groups say the federal government should muscle up oversight with an emergency order with worker safety requirements.

Gov. Greg Abbott created surge response teams to address outbreaks in nursing homes and meatpacking plants. Seth Christensen, spokesman for the Texas Department of Emergency Management, said the state provides tests when requested, working in cooperation with employers and county health officials.

“Everyone is aware of what we have to offer,” the spokesman said. “If there is a need for state assistance, we are ready and willing to provide it.”

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 540 president Johnny Rodriguez called for broader testing of all workers, including management. The national union is also calling for rapid testing of all workers. At other meatpacking locations around the nation, those efforts have been done jointly, with employers providing access to state health workers with testing kits.

“We cannot have a safe food supply without safety for workers in meatpacking and food processing plants and Gov. Abbott needs to do more to ensure their safety,” Rodriguez said in a statement. The union doesn’t represent workers at the Irving plant.

Dozens infected

The Brakebush plant in Irving, which employs about 750 people, has had 40 employees test positive since mid-March, said company spokesman Phill Trewyn. No fatalities have been reported.

Two dozen people have since returned to work, the company said on May 8.

Trewyn said the Wisconsin-based company closed the Irving plant from April 17 to April 20 for a deep cleaning. He said Brakebush has installed barriers between work spaces and uses an infrared temperature scanner for people entering work areas. Employees wear cloth masks.

“We have also formed an internal COVID-19 task force to ensure safety protocols are being met and to be a resource for all employees,” Trewyn said in a statement.

Trewyn said last week that no workers had tested positive for COVID-19 in May. The company has not responded to further questions.

But workers who labor shoulder to shoulder at the plant and others fear the contagion has spread to more people in the Dallas area. Sick workers who do not get themselves tested could spread the virus when they are out and about or when they return to the plant.

“The workers at these plants are essential workers, especially now,” said auxiliary Bishop Greg Kelly of the Dallas Catholic Diocese. “They help keep the food supply chain intact for all of us. ... They are particularly vulnerable because of the kind of work that they do and in greater need of protection at this time. Just as the state has done elsewhere in Texas, they should require testing of their employees for the safety of all.”

Across the nation, about 5,000 workers in about 115 meat and poultry plants have become infected with COVID-19. As of three weeks ago, at least 20 had died, according to the CDC. The UFCW president said in Senate testimony a week ago that the number of deaths had increased to 35.

An outbreak in the Texas Panhandle has led to state testing there. There are more than 300 coronavirus cases at the JBS beef plant in Cactus, representing a tenth of the workforce, the state has said. Moore County, where the plant is, has the highest per capita rate of known COVID-19 cases in Texas.

There are numerous meatpacking plants in the Panhandle, and the state says it has helped with testing at two there and six statewide. There are about a dozen meat processing plants in North Texas.

Public health and worker protection groups emphasize that CDC protocols are guidelines and not mandatory.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration “desperately needs to issue an emergency standard requiring poultry and beef and pork factories to implement OSHA recommendations for protecting workers” said Dr. David Michaels, an epidemiologist at George Washington University’s School of Public Health who served as assistant secretary for OSHA during the Obama administration. “As recommendations, they are not effective.”

The CDC guidelines call for at least six feet of separation between workers along processing lines and using plexiglass separators or other barriers “if feasible.” The guidelines also call for hand-washing stations and, “if possible,” hand sanitizer dispensers that are touch-free. The CDC also recommends, among other things, the wearing of cloth masks in meat and poultry facilities.

Like Michaels, Debbie Berkowitz, another OSHA official during the Obama years, said OSHA must do more, and issue emergency requirements. To get six feet of social distancing, the assembly line should be slowed, Berkowitz said.

OSHA stepped up safety requirements after the 2009 H1N1 flu outbreak, said Berkowitz, who now works for the National Employment Law Project, an advocacy group for workers.

“Without specific requirements, the workers will continue to get sick and die,” Berkowitz said. “Those poultry workers are feeding America. They have important jobs.”

Absent federal action, state governors have enormous power, Michaels said. “The governors have a great deal of power, they have police power. They can shut down a factory.”

Many Central American immigrants, refugees, Latinos and African-Americans work as low-wage earners in the assembly lines of the plants. That’s raised questions about how their modest incomes and need for their jobs makes them more vulnerable as they cut and package beef and chicken for the meals of the public.

Immigrants are among those hit especially hard by a lack of testing. Many have less access to proper health care.

“The ones who are low-paid workers are the ones who are really suffering,” said Elvia Wallace, head of the Believe In Yourself agency in Irving. The long-established nonprofit provides English, citizenship and computer classes in the city of about 242,000, where 1 out of 3 people is foreign-born.

The Brakebush workforce includes Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans and refugees from the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar, workers said.

Josephine Lopez-Paul, an organizer for [Dallas Area Interfaith](#), said she is organizing a plan to assist those families. “It’s in our collective interest to protect these workers,” Lopez-Paul said. “The state also has a responsibility to these workers.”

The Irving worker who tested positive for COVID-19 is grateful for the job at Brakebush. But at night, the worker dreams of laboring at the plant and getting sick again.

The Texan’s message to other workers: “Stay safe, man. This thing does not play. Try to do the best you can for yourself.”