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We are writing this letter in response to the article, “Cheap chicken, beef came at a cost. How American meat plants bred coronavirus hot spots,” by Sky Chadde, Kyle Bagenstose, Veronica Martinez Jacobo and Rachel Axon published on 5/22/20.

Champaign-Urbana Public Health visited the plant on April 27, 2020. This was one day after, and the first business day after, the CDC issued its Interim Guidance for Meat and Poultry Processing Workers and Employers. Prior to that Rantoul Foods was in compliance with all Centers for Disease Control (CDC) directives in place at the time and had proactively been screening employees for COVID-19 symptoms since February.

Rantoul Foods immediately implemented the additional safety measures mandated by the CU Public Health Department, which the article concedes.

However, the article quotes Julie Pryde, Champaign County’s health administrator as saying, “Even with those measures, it’s impossible for workers to stay far enough apart,” which implies that the measures Rantoul Foods is taking will not succeed in preventing another outbreak from occurring in the future. However, on May 15, 2020, Julie Pryde said, “It is almost impossible to prevent a case of COVID-19 from getting into any workplace, but if it enters into a workplace that has very stringent infection control measures, it will not be able to spread. After the current outbreak at Rantoul Foods winds down, the infection control protocols in place there now, if widely adhered to, should prevent another outbreak within the facility.”

Clearly, there is a discrepancy between those statements. Rantoul Foods has been adhering to the infection control protocols and putting their trust in the health department, in addition to their onsite medical provider, SafeWorks Illinois, to guide them in preventing additional workers from contracting COVID-19. An incredible community effort has taken place to not only address this outbreak, but to support the members of the community who have been affected. This effort includes elected officials, community leaders, local health care providers, the IL Pork Producers, the University of Illinois, and multiple health department employees. The article seems to imply that instead of being part of the team working together to ensure employee and community safety by preventing any future outbreaks, that the health department is relegated to responding to next inevitable one when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

A photograph of the medical staff that were preparing for onsite testing at Rantoul Foods on May 8th and May 9th included a caption that said “Plant officials said then that 200 more workers remained to be tested; however, no further testing events have been conducted. Instead, plant workers are encouraged to get tested at local health facilities.”

Again, this is somewhat misleading. Testing capacity and availability in Champaign-Urbana has increased since the onsite testing was performed, including a free drive-thru testing facility run by the Illinois National Guard specifically for essential workers. At the outset of the outbreak, Rantoul Foods workers



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were informed of their right to self-quarantine, and many took advantage of that. With those employees choosing to stay home, mass onsite testing taking place over a limited window on a specific day is, in fact, less convenient and employee-friendly than encouraging employees to utilize the available community testing facilities at their convenience. To that end, Rantoul Foods has partnered with Cultivadores Latino Center, a nonprofit organization that provides outreach programming and daycare for essential workers, to expand outreach to those workers who are not working due to either a positive COVID-19 test or the choice to self-quarantine. Part of that outreach is to encourage testing at a community facility.

The article specifically discussed Hispanic workers and the potential for mistreatment, but neglects to include information from Rev. Nelson Cuevas, the founder of Cultivadores, despite Mr. Chadde having received information about Rev. Cuevas efforts and many other news sources soliciting his perspective on the situation.

On May 8, 2020, Dave Hinton, of [The Rantoul Press](#), wrote,

Cuevas said the public also should not have a negative view of Rantoul Foods.

“We’ve met with the (human resources personnel) at Rantoul Foods. They’ve always run a safe work environment. I’ve never heard any Latino people concerned about their safety before COVID-19. Anyone working anywhere (now) is concerned with COVID-19,” Cuevas said.

And on May 19, 2020, Rob Stroud, of the [Journal Gazette Times-Courier](#), wrote,

Cuevas said out of the 30 Latino Rantoul Foods employees who tested positive, almost all of them were eager to return to work and are pleased with how the pork plant is handling the outbreak.

“You gotta understand this: we were all in compliance — daycares like mine, pork plants, the one in Rantoul — in compliance to the old way of doing things,” Cuevas said. “All of us had to learn to get into the new compliance that CDC and public health is having.”

The article then discusses the health risks in the meatpacking industry. Specifically, the article says, “What’s more, the health units in these meatpacking plants have numerous problems, including “lack of supervision of medical personnel, personnel working outside their scope of practice, out-of-date health unit protocols, inappropriate response to injuries and illness, lack of quality assurance, poor worker access to health units, and inadequate record keeping,” a 2017 GAO report found.”

However, at no point, does the article mention that Rantoul Foods has had a long-term partnership with SafeWorks Illinois, an Occupational Health provider in Champaign, IL. SafeWorks Medical Director, Dr. David Fletcher is board-certified in occupational and preventive medicine as well as public health. Not only does SafeWorks Illinois provide an on-site medical professional, but they worked with Rantoul



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Foods to develop an aggressive occupational health program that resulted in lower OSHA-reported injuries and lower workers compensation claims, despite increasing their number of hours worked by employees as the total employee hours worked increased. This program has been so successful in curtailing worker injuries, that Dr. Fletcher was asked to present information about the program at the 2017 National Association of Occupational Health Professionals (NAOHP) Annual Meeting.

Finally, the article addresses the issue of air circulation and ventilation, particularly in the “cold” area. It neglects to mention that an environmental virus survey, conducted as a joint effort by several different disciplines within the University of Illinois (Virology, Civil Engineering, and Veterinary Medicine) is commencing the week of 5/25 to evaluate ventilation in work areas to help minimize workers’ potential airborne exposure and will give insight into what, if any, additional precautions will need to be implemented to ensure employee safety.

Rantoul Foods agrees that employee safety in the meat processing industry deserves a spotlight, especially in light of the number of workers who have contracted COVID-19 since its emergence in the US. However, the company is disappointed that so much information was left out of this article that it encourages readers to infer things that are untrue about not only Rantoul Foods, but its business and community partners as well.