

THE CRUELEST CUTS *Fourth of Six Parts*

THE HUMAN COST OF BRINGING POULTRY TO YOUR TABLE



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"I certainly wouldn't want to think we ignored claims for help," said Mike Flowers of House of Raeford Farms in West Columbia, S.C. "We're not running a pie factory. It's a production plant."

Workers say they're denied proper medical care

BY AMES ALEXANDER,
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Staff Writers

Mike Flowers is a powerful gatekeeper. He often decides whether to send poultry workers to a doctor when they get hurt on the job or complain of chronic pain.

"I think we do a pretty good job of taking care of these folks," said Flowers, who treats workers at the House of Raeford Farms plant in West Columbia, S.C.

Ernestina Ruiz thinks otherwise.

In 2006, after months of de-boning thousands of chicken breasts each day, her hands and wrists began to hurt. She complained to Flowers at least three times, she said, but each time he gave her pain relievers or a bandage and sent her back to work.

"You're going to be fine," she recalled him saying.

A large lump grew on her left wrist. The pain got so bad, she said, she went to a private doctor and had surgery.

Day after day, poultry workers are cut by knives,

burned by chemicals or hurt by repetitive work, according to dozens of injury logs compiled by plants across the South.

Because many workers are illegal immigrants and can't afford private care, their health rests largely with company medical workers.

Those in-house attendants are supposed to help workers heal. Instead, some have prevented workers from receiving medical care that would cost the company money, an Observer investigation has found. And in some instances, the treatments they provide can do more harm than good.

At House of Raeford, some health care workers lack medical credentials. At least two came to their jobs with felony records.

House of Raeford officials said they staff plants with trained personnel who use accepted first-aid practices to handle minor injuries. Workers needing advanced care are referred to doctors, the company said.

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