

THE HUMAN COST OF BRINGING POULTRY TO YOUR TABLE

No time to heal, workers say

Streak from 1A

duce the likelihood of workplace safety inspections.

Caitlyn Davis, a former human resource administrator who quit in July, said injured employees often were required to work.

"People get hurt all the time," she said. "They (managers) just put them in the office to pass out supplies."

House of Raeford did not respond to specific allegations that it sometimes required injured employees to return to work.

"Employees are returned to light duty and to full duty on doctor's orders," Greenville complex manager Barry Cronin said in a written response to Observer questions.

Asked whether the company was motivated by workers' compensation costs, Cronin replied: "We followed doctor's orders on every case."

'I wanted to be at home resting'

Vicente's accident occurred months after she arrived in the United States in 2003 from her native Guatemala. She took a job in the chicken plant, she said, to support her parents and two children.

Vicente said she was groggy from medication so didn't question the House of Raeford nurse when she told her to return to work the next day. She said she went back wearing a cast, her arm in a sling.

"It was very, very strong pain," she said. "My whole arm was swollen. I lost three fingernails."

After days of wiping down tables and passing out supplies, Vicente said, managers told her to sweep, a task she described as impossible given her broken arm.

"I wanted to be at home resting," she said.

Belem Villegas, an employment supervisor who left the plant in 2005, said she remembers Vicente sitting in the office looking "sad and depressed." She said Vicente occasionally asked for permission to go home.

"I'd have to say no," Villegas recalled. "(Managers) wouldn't let people go home."

The company recorded Vicente's broken arm - but not the amputated finger - on injury and illness logs as required by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Those logs show she was placed on light duty for 64 days.

Because she didn't miss a complete work shift, her injury was not counted as a lost-time accident.

Doctors contacted by the Observer said patients who suffer fractures and amputations need initial time to heal before returning to work.

House of Raeford did not respond to questions about Vicente. In workers' compensation documents, the company said it returned her to work following her doctor's orders.

The doctor who treated her, John Millon, declined to comment.

The company fired Vicente seven months after her accident after learning through a workers' compensation case that she is an illegal immigrant. A judge ruled in 2006 that Vicente was entitled to additional workers' compensation benefits because her injury limited her ability to work.

A petite woman with long black hair that brushes her waist, Vicente hides her hand when talking with strangers.

In late September, she was unemployed. Her arm still burned, she said, and she couldn't fully move it. She said she can't do many things she once did, such as braid her hair. She avoids escalators, she said, because they remind her of the accident.

"I'm still scared of all the machines."

A tragedy in 2001

House of Raeford's safety streak was preceded by tragedy.

Longtime plant worker Jerome Sullivan had the sort of job few wanted - operating an auger at the Greenville plant that disposed of chicken feathers.

The auger is a spiral-shaped shaft resembling a drill bit. Sullivan's job took him up on a catwalk overlooking the massive machine, which transported feathers into waiting tractor trailers.

About midway through Sullivan's shift on Dec. 15, 2001, an employee noticed what appeared to be blood coming from the auger, according to S.C. OSHA documents. Another employee climbed onto the catwalk, peered down, and saw Sullivan's body wrapped around the auger shaft.

Sullivan had died after falling into the machine, his body ripped to shreds, according to the autopsy report.

The report also showed that Sullivan had too much alcohol in his system to



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Workers walk a path from their neighborhood to the House of Raeford poultry plant in Greenville, S.C., known locally as Columbia Farms.

Safety log shows no time off

House of Raeford Farms' records show that some employees are returning to work after suffering serious injuries. This page from the Greenville, S.C., plant's 2002 injury and illness logs shows a worker whose finger was cut off had 85 days of light duty and no days away from work.

occurred (north end)	Describe injury or illness, parts of body affected, and object/substance that directly injured or made person ill (e.g., Second degree burn on right forearm from acetylene torch)	the most serious result for each case			Days the injured or ill worker was:	
		Death (G)	Days away from work (H)	Job transfer or restriction (I)	On job transfer from or restriction (K)	Away from work (L)
L-6	Laceration to knee - cutting down boxes - 4 stitches	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	10 days	— days
	Swelling - Left Hand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6 days	— days
	Laceration to left arm (knife)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5 days	— days
	Laceration to right index finger (scissors)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10 days	— days
L-5	Amputation to left Index Finger (Saw)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	85 days	— days
P	Pain in right hand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	21 days	— days
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	— days	— days
9	Laceration to left Arm	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6 days	— days

SOURCES: House of Raeford Farms

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Villegas

legally drive a car.

Inspectors found that Sullivan was not wearing a harness and that the catwalk had inadequate safety railings. They also noted that the auger was missing its protective guard.

Shortly after Sullivan's death, plant managers ordered repairs on equipment throughout the plant, former workers and supervisors told the Observer.

"Stuff started getting fixed left and right," Villegas said. "There were safety committee meetings constantly."

Safety milestones were marked by parties, where managers handed out T-shirts and sweatshirts imprinted with the plant's safety mascot, a rooster named Strut McClucker.

Managers also awarded \$10 and \$25 gift certificates to employees in a free drawing. At a party in November 2006, managers cooked and served free hot dogs for employees on their lunch breaks.

None of the seven former supervisors who spoke with the Observer was told to lie about accidents, they said. But in the aftermath of Sullivan's death, some said, plant managers became more focused on eliminating lost-time accidents.

Villegas said her boss, human resources director Elaine Crump, told her lost-time accidents would increase workers' compensation costs.

Crump declined to comment for this article.

The plant fired Villegas in spring 2005, alleging she was "accepting money to provide employment favors to potential employees," Villegas denies those claims. She said she was forced out after speaking up for injured workers, including Vicente.

About six months after Sullivan's death, the Greenville plant had begun



A de-boning worker shows a sweatshirt touting one of the plant's milestones for "safe" hours.

its safety streak, which by last summer had topped 7 million safe hours.

Former line worker Alberto Sosa still has a T-shirt he received at one of the parties. It reads: "4,000,000 hours without a lost-time accident."

"It's a lie," said Sosa, who said he suffered from wrist and hand pains when he worked on the line de-boning chickens. "It's a party for no accidents, but there are accidents."

Injuries affect costs

Few things affect a company's workers' compensation costs more than lost-time injuries. Workers' compensation, a form of insurance that most employers are required to carry, pays medical expenses for workers hurt on the job, as well as a portion of wages when they're unable to work.

When companies record injuries and illnesses on their logs, they must in-

clude how many days injured employees spend away from work or on light duty. It's an honor system, and companies aren't required to share the information with regulators unless asked.

According to those logs, the Greenville plant averaged 30 injuries a year between 2002 and 2006. All were serious enough to require medical treatment beyond first aid or a transfer to light duty. But only two resulted in time away from work, records show, and those occurred before the company's safety streak began in mid-2002.

Petrona Agustin suffered the kind of injury that can drive up a company's cost for workers' compensation.

On June 11, 2003, the tip of her left little finger was severed when it got caught in a machine used to clean chicken gizzards. She said a company employee drove her to a hospital, where she had surgery.

Immediately after, Agustin was driven back to the plant to fill out paperwork so she could be moved to the day shift, she recalled. The next morning, she was back at work.

She spent more than a month passing out supplies and wiping down tables in the break room, becoming depressed and crying often at the thought of her lost finger, she told the Observer.

She said she would have gladly taken time off but said a company supervisor told her no. "I didn't want to work," said Agustin. "I was worried it would happen again."

House of Raeford wouldn't comment specifically about Agustin, citing medical confidentiality, but said her account "does not represent the full story."

"Any and all accidents are regrettable," the company said. "House of Raeford Farms, Inc. depends upon the advice of local doctors to let us know when an employee is eligible to work, and we abide by these doctors' orders."

Company logs show Agustin spent 47 days on light duty. As of September,

House of Raeford

The privately held company, based in Raeford, is among the top 10 U.S. chicken and turkey producers.

Chairman: Marvin Johnson.

Processing plants: Four in North Carolina, three in South Carolina and one in Louisiana.

Employees: About 6,000.

Annual sales: Nearly \$900 million, including some to China, Afghanistan and other countries.

Ranking: It's among the nation's top 10 chicken and turkey producers.

Production: Slaughters and processes about 29 million pounds of chicken and turkey each week.

Customers:

- Restaurants including Blimpie, Golden Corral and Ryan's.
- Schools around the U.S., including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

- Stores including Food Lion and Lowes Foods. The company's deli meat is marketed under the name "Lakewood Plantation."

- Distribution companies that supply food to restaurants and institutional kitchens.

Sources: Observer research, House of Raeford, Dun & Bradstreet, Watt Publishing, National Poultry and Food Distributors Association



she still worked at the plant.

She sometimes wears a prosthesis - a fake fingertip - colored to match her skin tone. She said she wears it to parties so she doesn't have to explain what happened.

"I was very sad. I couldn't look at my hands," she said. "I was embarrassed. I could never get my finger back."

Unhealthy practice?

Consultants who advise employers on ways to save money on workers' compensation costs say they sometimes recommend injured workers return to the workplace quickly. The sooner they are brought back, the consultants say, the sooner they are likely to resume their regular jobs.

A quick return can boost morale and speed recovery, they say. It also can help maintain their income, because workers receive partial pay when out on disability.

But several doctors who spoke to the Observer were skeptical of returning workers too quickly.

Dr. Blake Moore, who lives in Columbia, and has treated dozens of poultry workers, said bringing seriously injured workers back immediately "borders on reckless disregard."

Dr. Franco Godoy said it's inappropriate to return workers to work too quickly. SEE STREAK | 9A

(Managers) wouldn't let people go home."

BELEM VILLEGAS, FORMER EMPLOYMENT SUPERVISOR, ON TREATMENT OF INJURED WORKERS