Local immigrant community is finding its voice

At the beginning of the year, the Press-Citizen Editorial Board identified 10 issues to watch in 2014. Here is the next in a series of updates on those issues more than six months later.

Local immigrant community

What we said six months ago: "Over the past few years, a number of groups — including the Consultation of Religious Communities, Immigrant Voices and the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa — have been working to ensure that members of the local immigrant community are included in the local debates over government policy.

What we say now: The recent story of Kossiwa Agbenowassii has served as an important reminder of the types of challenges faced by many members of the local immigrant communities in Iowa. Agbenowassii had a job cleaning the Outback Steakhouse in Coralville, which closed in February. Rather than being employed directly by Outback, she was employed by an out-of-state company, Sandpiper Maintenance and Repair, which had a contract with Outback to clean its Iowa City and Cedar Rapids locations. Agbenowassii says that Sandpiper — which is not licensed in the state of Iowa — refused to pay her for multiple weeks worth of work, totaling more than $2,300 in wages.

We’d like to believe that Agbenowassii’s story is an aberration or a worst-case scenario. But according to the anecdotal and statistical information compiled by the Iowa Policy Project and the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa, these stories are anything but rare for low-income workers in Iowa — especially when those workers are made all more vulnerable through language barriers, immigration status or mental disabilities.

Agbenowassii eventually reached out to the Center for Worker Justice, which helped her file complaints with various state and federal agencies. And Outback, under pressure of from protests organized by the center, severed its relationship with Sandpiper.

Labor and immigrant advocates haven’t been willing to let Outback off the hook that easily. They say the restaurant chain should make good on the money owed to this mother of five.

We hope that the center — along with other worker/immigrant rights advocates — will use Agbenowassii’s story to spur Iowa lawmakers to change the law and make it much more difficult for unscrupulous employers to take advantage of their more vulnerable employees.

Community IDs: In the meantime, progress is being made on having Johnson County government start issuing community identification cards for Johnson County residents who lack the documentation needed for such common activities as cashing their pay checks, renting an apartment, purchasing medication or showing to a police officer after reporting a crime.

Iowa City originally expressed interest in such cards as a way of protecting the safety of undocumented immigrants in the city. But the list of potential beneficiaries of such cards has expanded to include the spouses and dependents of international students, other immigrants/refugees who are in transitional status, victims of domestic abuse as well as elderly and low-income residents.