

Summer employers brace for shortage of foreign workers

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HYANNIS, Mass.—Breakfast will not be served this summer at Cape Cod's Crown & Anchor. The Provincetown resort and entertainment complex usually hires 10 to 12 people from Jamaica and Eastern Europe each summer as cooks, housekeepers and maintenance workers. But new visa restrictions mean the guest workers it used last year aren't expected back. With fewer workers, the resort's management realized it wouldn't have the manpower to serve three meals a day.

"We don't want to run overtime for employees just to produce breakfast," said assistant general manager Rick Reynolds. "That doesn't make financial sense."

Employers around the country who thrive on seasonal business are preparing to lose thousands of foreign workers they've hired in past summers to work in restaurants, hotels, landscaping and other industries. New visa controls are cutting the number of temporary foreign workers eligible to return to the country, so employers are scouring job fairs for replacements, lobbying Congress for help and bracing for staff shortages they say will make business tough.

Tourism and hospitality officials envision various problems if the jobs go unfilled: Restaurants may have fewer tables and longer wait-times. Hotel check-in times could be delayed as fewer housekeepers hustle to clean rooms. Resorts may offer fewer meals to guests.

"They will function, they will survive, they will be open—they just won't thrive," warned Jane Nichols Bishop, a Cape Cod consultant who matches up foreign seasonal workers with businesses.

The shortage hit winter ski resorts from Colorado to Vermont and is expected to affect summer hot spots like Newport, R.I., and Cape Cod, where businesses count on foreign workers to meet the tourist demand. Many seasonal workers have held the same job for years, and employers say they value their returning workers' experience and count on them to fill the critical, if unheralded, jobs that high school and college students typically aren't interested in.

Foreign workers issued the visas, known as H-2B visas, are generally offered the same pay as an American worker would get for the same job, though the actual salary varies depending on the position and the location.

Rick Farrick, who owns five inns in Newport, is looking for replacements for about a half-dozen Jamaican housekeepers, who earned \$9 or \$10 an hour. He said he was willing to offer more money to find quality local replacements, but said that wouldn't solve the problem of losing experienced workers who have worked for him for years.

"If someone's been here for three years and he's done the same job for three years, you just tell them to go do it—and they do it," Farrick said.

The problem involves a shortage of H-2B visas, which are issued to foreign workers for temporary, nonagricultural jobs. The government caps the annual number of visas at 66,000.

Until the fall, workers who had received an H-2B visa in one of three previous years could return for another year without being counted against the cap. Last year, with returning workers exempt from the quota, roughly 130,000 visas were issued.

That changed when Congress, in a debate over comprehensive immigration reform, failed to renew the returning worker exemption. The provision expired Sept. 30.

Now, lawmakers are weighing proposals to let returning workers come back. A House subcommittee heard testimony this month from H-2B employers about the need for more visas for seasonal workers, with some key lawmakers offering encouraging signs that they would support an extension.

"The problem is, the later we go, the less likely it will have an impact for this summer season," said Rep. Jim Langevin, a Rhode Island Democrat.

The shortage provides an opening for local workers, especially with a slumping economy and a national unemployment rate of 5.1 percent in March. But Keith Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, said there's usually not enough local interest to meet the need.

Still, a job fair in Hyannis, Mass., this month offering seasonal positions at resorts and restaurants drew scores of hopefuls, including Robert Buxton, 19, who was recently laid off from an electronics plant.

"I'm not leaping for joy now that these foreign workers aren't here," Buxton said. "But it's good for me. It stinks for them."

Newport County is looking to replace around 500 H-2B employees this summer, Stokes said, while Cape Cod and the islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard usually have between 5,000 and 7,000 H-2B employees.

Employers are looking into whether they can hire workers on visas other than the H-2B visas. Some are also bringing in foreign workers who are already in the country on an H-2B visa and are willing to extend their stays.

Steven Filippi, president of Ballard's Inn, a resort on Block Island—a popular vacation spot off Rhode Island's coast—said he had found 20 to 30 H-2B workers in Florida and Arizona to replace the Filipino workers he used to hire as bartenders, chefs and servers.

Many of those workers from last year were so confident they'd come back that they left behind clothes and furniture.

Other employers aren't sure what they'll do.

Milton Kelley, general manager of Green Harbor Waterfront Lodging in Falmouth, said he hires just a few H-2B employees each year but expects the shortage to affect him indirectly because bigger businesses will draw from the same local pool he uses.

"We might have to close a certain part of the building—whatever it takes to service the people, we'll do," he said. "We'll be out making beds—the phones won't get answered."