

Employers find Puerto Rico

In immigration crackdown, its citizen workers valued

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Washington — Some American companies — facing a crackdown on hiring illegal immigrants and difficulties in using temporary worker programs — are venturing south to solve their labor woes, to Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico is part of the United States, so its residents are American citizens.

It has been the focus of recruiting efforts in the past, especially for bilingual police officers and teachers, but the latest trend includes a greater variety of industries, such as hotels and resorts, hospitals, and meat-processing operations.

Luis De Rosa, president of the Puerto Rico Chamber of Commerce of South Florida, said requests from mainland companies to find workers on the island have increased significantly in the past three months, especially for seasonal employees.

"We are getting calls here all the time," he said.

Recent inquiries include those from construction companies, hotels, vacation resorts, and hospitals looking for nurses, he said.

De Rosa said it's a match made in heaven: Stateside companies get good, legal workers and Puerto Ricans earn money that they need. The unemployment rate on the island is about 10 percent, twice as high as on the U.S. mainland, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

John Feliciano, a vice president at Management Search & Supporting Services, a company that helps mainland companies recruit workers from Puerto Rico, said the island has seen a decline in its local job market, especially in manufacturing, since plants have taken operations overseas to Malaysia, China, Singapore and other places.

"These highly skilled people — like plant managers and others — have been left with nowhere to work in Puerto Rico," he said.

Feliciano's company is expanding in part to help recruit nurses from Puerto Rico, because of a high demand.

Dan Shube, director of marketing at Labor Finders International, a mainland employment recruiting firm, said that Puerto Rican workers are an attractive workforce because of their legal status and other reasons.

"Many companies that are looking for labor are going to Puerto Rico because the population there has a good work ethic and is more closely aligned to that of the mainland United States," he said.

Meadowbrook Farms in Rantoul, Ill., has recruited about 60 workers from Puerto Rico over the past several months, said Jim Altemus, vice president of marketing and communications for the company. Of those, about 50 are working at the meat-processing plant in various jobs.

The effort started through a Meadowbrook employee in the human resources department from Puerto Rico who helped the company make contacts through her family on the island.

Company officials have made three recruiting trips to the island so far, Altemus said.

Cargill Meat Solutions, a pork processor in Beardstown Ill., began recruiting workers from Puerto Rico last year.

They now have dozens of workers from the island, according to various news reports.

The Aspen Skiing Company, which operates four resorts in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, was in a bind last fall when a problem with its applications for H-2B visas for temporary workers left it without a complete staff for the tourist season. The solution: a recruiting trip to San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico.

Jeff Hanle, a spokesman for the company, said it was the first time that it had looked for workers on the island.

About 20 Puerto Rican men and women were recruited to work as maids, maintenance workers, and other hotel jobs.

They were all given discounted housing, much like other seasonal employees, Hanle said.

The situation was not ideal, however. The Puerto Ricans had a hard time adjusting to the snow and ice, making it unclear whether the company will use them as a "long-term solution," he said.

The hotel and lodging industries have been pushing hard for an increase in H-2B visas, which allow foreigners to work temporarily in non-agricultural, low-skilled jobs.

But Congress has yet to act, making it more likely that the businesses will look at other sources of labor, such as Puerto Rico, experts said.

Muzaffar Chishti, who heads the New York office of the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, said that Puerto Ricans are in many ways an ideal labor force for seasonal work during the warm summer months because they like going back to the island for the winter.

In addition, he said it is a positive development that mainland companies are looking for workers there.

It could be the start of a trend, similar to the one that brought thousands of Puerto Rican workers to the garment factories in New York and other cities in the 1950s, he added.

Those workers were vital to the apparel industry and replaced immigrants from Eastern Europe, Chishti added.

"In some way, it fits the old cycle, that Puerto Ricans are an important supply of labor in the United States when immigrant supplies sort of deplete," he said.

But Chishti also said that Puerto Rico, with its limited labor pool, cannot begin to solve all the U.S. needs for workers. Puerto Rico has 3.9 million people, of whom 20 percent are under 15 years old.

Meanwhile, the United States has an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants, many of them working, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

De Rosa, with the Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce, said that the recruitment of workers in Puerto Rico is likely to escalate as the government continues to crack down on illegal immigration.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has stepped up immigration raids over the past year and a half, leading to thousands of arrests and deportations of workers who were in the United States illegally. The actions have occurred in many states, including Texas, Florida, and Georgia, and in various industries, including janitorial services, hotels, poultry processing operations, and a leather goods plant.

On Monday, ICE conducted a raid at a large kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa, in which 390 people were arrested.

Such actions might lead to another large wave of Puerto Rican workers coming to the United States, De Rosa said.

"It happened once before, and was very successful, and it looks like it's poised to happen again," he said.