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Nicholaas Banda came to Steamboat Springs in October to work for Mountain Resorts, which is owned by Resort Group, on an H-2B work visa. Banda is from South Africa. Because of the slow start to the season, Resort Group and other companies are offering extra assistance to workers who haven't been able to garner typical paychecks. [Enlarge photo](#) — Photo by John F. Russell

Employers help seasonal workers get through lean early winter

By [Zach Fridell](#)

Many seasonal workers recently found that the national economic crunch created a local conundrum: They were in Steamboat Springs, ready to work, but the hours just weren't coming.

Because of low tourist turnout early in the season, little snowfall before December and lowered expectations, lodging companies did not start workers as early as in typical years. From November through the beginning of December, the paychecks weren't there.

To help employees through the lean month, several local companies used the resources of their employees and community to help workers find more firm financial ground.

For workers at Resort Group, that assistance came in the form of food and clothing drives with goods donated by their co-workers, as well as bags of groceries from the LIFT-UP of Routt County Food Bank.

Dina Fisher, director of human resources for Resort Group, said the company brought in workers in November, even though they could not start them until December, because their leases were up at previous jobs, and they needed somewhere to stay. Many of the employees are in the country on H-2B work visas and were employed together in Michigan before moving to Steamboat.

"They came out here with the bare minimum," she said.

Resort Group subsidizes \$400 of employee housing a month, with employees paying \$350, including utilities. The group also held food and clothing drives to get employees the goods they needed.

"With the slow start to the season, it was really a hardship. We had three different events for food drives," Fisher said. "Once they're here, of course, you feel responsible for them, and you feel terrible that people aren't eating, that they don't have grocery money."

Fisher said about 60 workers are working on H-2B visas, totaling about half of the work force.

Workers in the country on an H-2B visa are not allowed to work at any other job other than the one described on their visa, creating a fixed income and no other options if the hours to work are not provided.

Trish Sullivan, vice president of human resources for Steamboat Ski and Resort Corp., said the company is in the middle of a food drive for employees and is providing waived rental costs for employees who do not get the hours they need.

"For people who are in our employee housing, we made arrangements to in some cases waive late fees and have ... waived a part of their rent," she said. "We've also provided \$3 meals three times a week."

Sullivan said the workers most in need are those whose extensions for H-2B visas were denied, leaving them unable to work. For those former workers, she said, Ski Corp. waives rent for housing and provides free groceries.

Local kindness

Resort Group employee Nicholaas Banda, from South Africa, said he has been impressed by the kindness of the Steamboat community.

Banda arrived in Steamboat on Oct. 28, after mistakenly taking an airplane to Colorado Springs, forcing him to ride shuttles to Steamboat. He said the shuttles took most of the money he had saved, but when people heard of his story, he received three nights of free lodging when he arrived in town.

"The people are so kind over here," he said.

Banda could not begin until Dec. 1, and because he could not work in any other job because of his visa status, he "toured the town" before his job started. In that time, he visited the food bank and found everyone to be very helpful, offering him assistance in whatever he needed.

On Monday, Banda was working at the Terraces at Eagleridge condominiums shoveling snow from outdoor stairwells and earning praise from his supervisor, Assistant Director of Maintenance Tom Chaney, for his hard work.

Resort Group directed needy employees to LIFT-UP's food bank, where seasonal workers are eligible for two bags of groceries per season. But when 33 of the workers had not yet received a paycheck by Dec. 10, Fisher said she started asking for more help.

It was then that she called Pam Graham, food bank and case manager for LIFT-UP, to request additional help.

Graham said it took "a lot of talking" by Fisher to convince her that the employees may need additional food, even after support from Resort Group employees.

"It's very out of the ordinary," she said, as she allowed the neediest employees of the group to gather another bag of nonperishable food.

"We were getting hit so hard, mostly by the people from Michigan and also the people who had come in to work for Ski Corp. and the other property management companies," she said.

David Freseman, executive director of LIFT-UP, said the food bank has seen higher demand than usual. But he said he understands that companies are trying to help their employees meet needs.

"To be fair, those companies are trying to do what they can to assist people," he said.

Most donations collected by the companies go directly to workers. Freseman said he has seen no increase in corporate donations during the past months.

Not all companies are finding it as hard to meet demand, however. Gail Henry, human resources manager for ResortQuest, said her company hired fewer workers this year and did not experience the great need of other lodging companies.

Henry said she informs new workers about assistance available in the community, such as LIFT-UP's food bank, when they are hired.

"We tell them about that kind of service, but we didn't have any requests for assistance," she said.

Graham said the peak of demand may have passed as workers now are receiving their full hours of work and have settled into their jobs. Now, the most workers she sees are locals who have been laid off or lost hours because of the declining economy.