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Fewer workers, fewer summer festivals

Amusement companies can't get workers, who can't get visas

By Jean Murphy | Daily Herald Correspondent

A summertime tradition as American as apple pie could be hurt by the congressional deadlock over immigration reform.

Local carnival operators say they may be forced to offer fewer rides and skip some smaller events this year because they are having trouble getting the workers they need. Last year, two local ride operators got about half their workers through the visa program that's being held up.

"Our family-owned and -operated business that we have built for the last 23 years is in real jeopardy," said Mary Johnson of Arlington Heights-based Fantasy Amusements. She said she's holding off on buying new rides and may have to cancel some smaller events.

It's the same for Ed Dame, operations manager for Illinois carnivals at Blomsness All-Star Amusements of South Barrington. "Without these workers, we will have to severely scale down our business," he said. All-Star provides rides for events such as Frontier Days in Arlington Heights, the Illinois State Fair, Buffalo Grove Days and Schaumburg's Septemberfest.

Reform work stalls

Before adjourning last year, Congress failed to renew a law allowing seasonal foreign workers who came to the U.S. over the last three years to return for another season without being counted against an annual cap on such workers. Key lawmakers balked at a renewal unless it was part of a comprehensive immigration reform plan.

"They are going for total immigration reform, so they are holding hostage another visa program which has been working well in order to get what they want," Johnson said.

The number of H-2B visas for nonagricultural seasonal and temporary workers is capped at 66,000 annually. As the program has grown more popular, Congress in recent years has passed extensions that exempted returning workers from the annual cap.

The latest extension expired Sept. 30, cutting the number of such workers allowed by more than half.



Carnival-goers are whipped around on the Power Surge ride during Schaumburg's Septemberfest. Local carnival operators say an immigration fight in Washington is making it hard for them to get the workers they need to keep the rides operating.

Mark Black | Daily Herald file photo



Kids ride on a Fantasy Amusements Tilt-A Whirl during the Elk Grove Rotary Fest. The carnival's operator says her business is being hurt by an immigration fight in Washington.

Daniel White | Staff Photographer

Rep. Luis Gutierrez, a Chicago Democrat who is chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Immigration Task Force, said in a news release that the caucus has consistently supported the visa program. But he added, the caucus "will continue to emphasize a holistic approach to fixing our badly broken immigration system" to bring "12 million people out of the shadows."

Ski resorts in Vermont and Colorado were the first to feel the impact of the cutback in the number of seasonal workers allowed. Ten of Vermont's 19 ski areas employ roughly 700 H-2B visa workers, making up 8 percent of the state's ski work force, said Parker Riehle of the Vermont Ski Areas Association.

Impact is dramatic

For local carnivals, the effect is even more dramatic, operators said.

"This will affect 60 percent of our work force, so we will have to just concentrate on our larger and more popular events and that will hurt a lot of schools, charities and municipalities that count on us," said Dame, of All-Star Amusements.

"We will do our best not to have to cancel events," said Johnson, of Fantasy Amusements. "But we just don't know what the future will bring. And we are not alone. There are hundreds of small businesses across the country in the same situation."

Quality rides are important to groups such as the Mount Prospect Lions Club, which has earned more than \$30,000 a year for charity in each of the past five years from its Fourth of July festival, which features Fantasy Amusement rides.

"I'm not sure we would be able to have a fair if there are no carnival rides," said Jeff Hady, a Mount Prospect Lion and chairman of the 2008 fair. "I don't think that the music and the food tent alone would be enough to bring families out."

Visa process tricky

Carnival operators said they rely on seasonal foreign workers because of the nature of their business.

"If we could hire locally, we would not be in this position. It is because we have not been able to get a reliable American/local work force that we've looked to a foreign labor force," Johnson said. "We work when most other people play -- evenings, summers, weekends and holidays. Factor into that we do not work year-round and our schedules can vary from week to week and therein lies the need."

Getting seasonal foreign workers is not easy even when visas are available. Employers have to prove their need to the U.S. Department of Labor, hire an immigration attorney, work with recruiters in distant countries, pay for round-trip airfare and pay prevailing wages.

But it has become a cost of doing business.

"Last year, of our core group of 55 employees, 24 were foreign workers who were hired through the government's H-2B visa program for temporary, nonagricultural workers," Johnson said. "Our temporary workers go through extensive background checks and drug testing before they come and then they are grateful to be here. They work, contribute to the economy, pay taxes and then go home."

Other firms hurt

Elsewhere, one Texas-based traveling circus has canceled its 2008 season. Crab-picking houses, beach resorts, golf courses and other seasonal businesses are complaining. And the Delaware Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association is worried that its trainers won't be able to hire enough grooms and hot walkers.

But Arlington Park President Roy Arnold said racing fans here need not worry. He said trainers are independent and handle their own hiring.

"We have a unique situation in Illinois because there are only two thoroughbred racetracks and we don't run at the same time," Arnold said. "So we have a good number of stables that just move from one track to the other and employ their people year-round. So they come in on a different visa program."

Visa fight

- Congress caps H-2B visas for nonagricultural seasonal temporary workers at 66,000.
- In recent years, Congress has exempted returning workers from the cap.
- This year, no exemption was granted because of the deadlock over immigration reform.
- That cut the number of seasonal workers admitted by more than 50 percent.
- Businesses affected include ski areas, vacation destinations, seafood processors, landscaping firms, pool companies and racetracks.

Source: The Associated Press