

Foreign workers filling hole for area business

Tremont landscaper turns to H-2B non-immigrant program to fill jobs



DAVID ZALAZNIK/JOURNAL STAR

Jesus Gomez works on a landscaping project Tuesday near Dunlap for Stuber Land Design. Gomez, a resident of the Mexican state of Michoacan de Ocampo, works for Stuber nine months a year under the U.S. Department of Labor's H-2B program. The program allows foreign workers to legally work in the country to perform "temporary nonagricultural services." Gomez has returned the past eight years to work for Stuber.

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When Stuber Land Design posts job openings, the local landscape is often barren.

Seasonal work involving digging, lifting and pushing a heavy wheelbarrow isn't the American dream.

South of the U.S. border, that work represents the opportunity of a lifetime. Wages ranging from \$8-14 per hour, plus overtime, mean many Mexicans can make more in an hour with the Tremont-based landscaping company than they do in a day back home.

Because of that, owner Dale Stuber said he has little trouble filling five slots for the H-2B non-immigrant program.

Although any use of foreign labor is a dicey topic these days amid widespread calls for immigration reform in the legislature, Stuber sees H-2B in simple terms: he needs laborers.

'There is the one group that says they are filling a niche of work that Americans will not do,' Stuber said. 'Then there's another group that says, 'Oh, that's not true. There's Americans to do these jobs.'

'I'll guarantee you, there are not Americans to do a lot of these jobs. I advertise like crazy looking for people. I can't get people to work.'

Businesses are required to advertise jobs locally before applying for foreign workers.

Under the H-2B program, the U.S. Department of Labor allows foreign workers to legally work in the country to perform 'temporary nonagricultural services.' The H-2B visa classification specifies the work be 'seasonal, peakload or intermittent.' Landscaping, which shuts down in the winter months here in Illinois, falls under that category.

At the end of the H-2B stint, lasting a maximum of 10 months, the worker must return to his or her home country.

Land of opportunity

Stuber has utilized the H-2B program for about a decade, and it provides about 20 percent of his seasonal work force.

All of his current H-2B workers come from the villages of Munguia and La Soledad in the state of Michoacan de Ocampo. Why do workers there leave family behind, braving a 48-hour bus ride to Illinois and a language barrier?

Stuber found his answer last winter, when he visited the homes of longtime H-2B workers in Mexico. He was bowled over by the hospitality of the people, but he also was struck by working conditions there. Stuber visited a brick factory where workers mixed mud and straw using their feet, for \$10-15 per day.

One of Stuber's employees, 25-year-old Jesus Gomez, used to work on his father's farm. Last winter, Gomez successfully petitioned to return to Peoria — where he rents a home with other Mexico natives — and work for Stuber for an eight consecutive year. He leaves behind a wife and 4-year-old daughter for up to nine months per year.

Gomez enjoys his co-workers, from whom he has learned fluent English, and said landscaping work is no problem after years on the farm.

'Everybody works hard in Mexico,' Gomez said. 'Working with soil and carrying a bag of fertilizer all day is tough. And you work for like \$13 a day. There's better money here.'

Gomez's first year here, his three roommates quietly returned home to Mexico during the night. He awoke to their alarm clock buzzing and noticed their belongings were gone.

Since then, none of Stuber's foreign workers have left prematurely. Four of his current H-2B employees are returnees, including Gomez's brother Augustin. Stuber attributes the continuity to word of mouth.

'Rather than just take a random person, I would much rather get someone I know that has a connection,' Stuber said. 'It's a brother or a cousin or a neighbor of a worker here. My workers who are already with me know the character of people I want to employ. That happens to be the same type of person they'd like to work with. They'd like to work with a high-character person.'

Stuber informs customers of his workers' status, in case they worry the employees are illegal. He said the Mexico natives are punctual and show a strong work ethic.

'Honestly, these are the type of character guys I wouldn't mind having sit with my kids for half a day,' he said. 'I trust them that much, and many of our customers do, too. These are good guys.'

Gridlock

Stuber realizes his company was fortunate to maintain five H-2B slots in 2008.

There is a limit of 66,000 H-2B visas per year in the U.S. In past years, returning workers didn't count against those numbers. This year, amid legislative backlogs, they did.

That means this year's H-2B numbers are cut in half from recent years.

The Illinois Green Industry Association represents about 600 landscaping companies, nurseries, garden centers, irrigation suppliers and green-industry contractors. According to executive director Dave Bender, those companies have about 1,000 total H-2B workers — mostly located in southern Illinois and in the Chicago area, other than Stuber's five.

'The lack of a solid, comprehensive H-2B program has really affected this industry,' Bender said.

News reports from throughout the nation have painted the picture of service, tourism and landscaping industries, for example, scrambling because of labor shortages.

Several pieces of legislation involving foreign workers, including H-2B, farming jobs and other classifications, are stalled. Exemptions are unlikely to come in time to help businesses in 2008, if at all.

The IGIA lobbies for immigration reform, as does its national counterpart, the American Nursery and Landscape Association.

Craig Regelbrugge, the ANLA's vice president for government relations and research, is skeptical his industry will see any immediate relief.

'The gridlock in Congress right now is just legendary,' Regelbrugge said. 'We're working our tails off, but I'm not wildly optimistic.

'We're getting toward the point where getting the returning worker exemption for next year is going to be a big victory.'

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