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Hotels seek workers on eve of summer travel season

By Meade Gruver
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CHEYENNE, Wyo. - The shortage of workers at Ted Blair's three hotels near Yellowstone National Park is so severe that Blair himself might soon be busing tables and stripping beds.

Less than a month before the start of the summer travel season, Blair and other hotel owners are scrambling to find low-wage employees because Congress dramatically reduced the number of guest-worker visas during last year's immigration debate.

"We will keep running," Blair said. "We have to - even if the management has to make beds."

The labor shortage is so severe that some hotels in the Rocky Mountains are hiring staffing firms and turning to foreign students for help. Others are considering getting out of the business altogether.

"If you've owned a property for years and years, and suddenly you have to make beds all day, you just can't handle it," said Lynn Birleffi, president of the Wyoming Lodging and Restaurant Association.

Because they operate in small communities that have limited work forces, the hotels often have to recruit guest workers from other countries. To participate in the guest-worker visa program, they must first demonstrate that they tried unsuccessfully to hire U.S. citizens.

The problems began last year, when the Congressional Hispanic Caucus tried to force comprehensive immigration reform by blocking an annual bill that has allowed the number of guest workers with H-2B visas to climb to almost double the yearly cap of 66,000.

If it had passed, the bill would have allowed workers who already had visas to return to their home countries and then come back to the U.S. with a new visa - without being counted toward the cap.

But because the legislation was stymied, many workers who leave the U.S. to visit their families cannot come back. That has reduced the ranks of guest workers, leaving businesses to compete over a much smaller group of potential employees.

Outside Rocky Mountain National Park in northern Colorado, the Stanley Hotel has hired a Vermont company to help find guest workers who stayed in the U.S. on visa extensions that are good for up to three years.

"I cannot tell you the time that I spend recruiting," said Christy Rose, the Stanley's human resources director. "We cannot get back our H-2B (workers) who went home. The only option that we are left with right now is everyone scrounging around to find anyone in the U.S. who is on an extended H-2B visa."

One guest worker coming to her rescue is Lilia Giovanna Reyes Pinilla, a 28-year-old chemical engineer from Bogota, Colombia, who came to the U.S. to learn English, which will expand her career prospects back home.

For the last 2 1/2 years, she has used visa extensions to remain in the U.S. while working at a ski resort in Maine and at resorts and restaurants in Vermont and Virginia. She expects this summer's stint waiting tables at the Stanley to be her last in the U.S.

"Everything they offered me, I took," she said.

Matt Hefner, president of RSI Seasonal Staffing Solutions, the Vermont firm hired by the Stanley, usually makes two or three trips each year to places like Jamaica, South Africa and Bulgaria to recruit workers. But this year, he's stayed home in response to the visa crunch.

"We're trying to get as many people to as many of our clients as we can," Hefner said. "We're going to do the best we can to make sure they're still standing when this thing gets resolved."

For some hotels, finding workers with extended visas is a last resort because it involves so much red tape.

"We don't put a lot of hope into that one. It's a very difficult process to get the extensions, and you have to get the dates to fit perfectly," said Scott Horn, chief administration officer at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort.

Horn said he survived ski season with the help of 130 workers on J-1 student visas. He plans to do the same this summer, bringing in as many as 35 students from countries like Serbia and Romania through sponsoring agencies including the YMCA. One advantage of that approach: the government doesn't limit the number of J-1 student visas.

Without some kind of resolution to the visa situation, the labor shortage could tempt some businesses to hire illegally.

"Nobody will admit to this, but I've spoken to several employers who say that in a worst-case scenario, they're going to be forced to hire whoever comes in, which obviously opens the door for workers who aren't authorized to work in the U.S.," said Joel Anderson, a Denver immigration attorney.

Carmina Oaks, director of the Latino Resource Center in Jackson, said H-2B workers and business owners want to stay within the law. But, she said, workers face a tough decision between leaving and possibly not being able to return, or staying and not seeing their families.

"It's just really a very sad situation," Oaks said. "Families are being divided."

Angel Reyes, 42, earns \$10.25 an hour doing maintenance work at the Cowboy Village Motel in Jackson. He's held that job for seven years and has been able to return to Mexico every year to visit his wife and daughters in Mexico City.

If he goes home now, all bets are off. He probably wouldn't get a visa to return to work in Jackson.

"That's the question everyone is asking themselves right now," Reyes said. "That's the problem. If I don't get a visa, I can't come back."