

Employers struggle with temporary work visas

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HOUMA — Earlier this year, 1,000 workers labored for Chet Morrison Contractors in its three United States yards.

But abruptly in August, about 200 of them were gone.

They were foreign workers who had to leave because their visas expired.

And at least for now, laborers like them are unlikely to return.

“There were several jobs we had to pull off of. We could no longer provide service to that client,” said John DeBlieux, the company’s risk manager. “It was a mad rush to staff the jobs these guys were on. We lost the skill set in a hurry. It was very difficult to replace them.”

Employers in the oil, gas, seafood and sugar industries say it’s becoming harder to obtain and renew the H-2B visas such workers require.

These visas have helped fill the gaps for local industries facing chronically low unemployment in manufacturing and fabrication, which power Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes’ economies.

“We’ve come to depend on this group of individuals to supplement the workforce during peak load needs,” said Tony Boudreaux, president of the South Central Industrial Association and vice president of Superior Labor Services. “It’s going to put some pressure. You have to keep your business running or have to turn down a certain amount of work.”

Confronted with explosive demand for storm repairs, local employers say they began bringing in workers after hurricanes Katrina and Rita on those visas, which last for 10 months.

Since then, the companies say they’ve provided training, housing and transportation for the workers.

Under the Department of Homeland Security, a total of 66,000 of the visas will be given out in 2009. Up until late 2007, returning workers were exempt from that cap.

Congress refused to renew the exemption, meaning the pool of available credentials was reduced significantly.

Because workers who got the visas were allowed to keep coming back, it’s hard to pin down exactly how many foreign workers are here.

But in 2007 Louisiana used about 10 percent of the total visa entries for the United States, which amounts to more than 7,000 employees entering the U.S.

That's according to figures from the Department of Homeland Security provided by the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute, an immigration think tank based in Washington, D.C.

In Houma, Boudreaux estimates that roughly three-quarters of companies use foreign workers, either directly or through employment agencies.

Kevin Voisin, a Terrebonne Parish councilman and marketing director for Houma's Motivait Seafood oyster processor, says at one time after Katrina his company employed around 30 foreign workers out of its staff of 100. The last of them went home in the middle of last year because they couldn't get their visas.

That correlates, he estimated, to about a \$1 million drop in sales.

Employers stress that they are doing all they can to recruit locally, in the state, and even across the nation. But company representatives like Craig Roussel, vice-president and chief administrative officer at Bollinger Shipyards, say it's still not enough.

"In a perfect world we would have all domestic workers," said Roussel, who estimates that foreign labor makes up 10 to 15 percent of the Lockport-based company's workforce. "We certainly try."

"You get to a point where you just don't have the bodies to do the work," he said. "That's not good for the shipyard, and not good for the economy as a whole."

Holding on to workers is also a battle.

"We get a lot of people who come and work one or two days and don't show up again," Voisin said.

Motivatit hired about 200 domestic workers this year but only retained 30 or 40, he added.

Local employers have worked to push their position in favor of more visas.

Jane Arnette, executive director of the South Central Industrial Association, said the group has already met with its federal delegation once on the subject and plans to put together another meeting.

Lawmakers like Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, have floated unsuccessful bills to allow small numbers of the visas.

A change seems unlikely for the moment.

After a bill for comprehensive immigration reform failed in the summer of 2007, a group of Hispanic lawmakers resolved to block piecemeal immigration measures until the body is willing to consider another comprehensive bill to tackle the problem as a whole.

Stephanie Allen, press secretary for Sen. Mary Landrieu D-La., said immigration issues would likely stay on the back burner for some time while Congress is focused on dealing with the current financial crisis.

"With the downturn in the economy and more and more people out of work, it becomes harder to say, 'Bring people into the country to get jobs,'" she said.

But that doesn't dull the missed opportunity and frustration employers face.

Jeremy Zollinger, a New Orleans-based immigration attorney, says he gets frequent calls from businesses trying hard to legally set up the temporary arrangements.

“It really drives them nuts,” he said. “Especially when they know there are workers right across the border. It’s very frustrating.”

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