

May 1st, 2008

Business owners feel the pinch of summer worker shortage

[By Pru Sowers](#)

Banner Staff

PROVINCETOWN – With the summer bearing down on Cape Cod and more businesses re-opening every weekend, the reality of the anticipated shortage of seasonal workers is beginning to emerge.

The consensus thus far is that there are enough workers to open for the season but not enough to sustain the town through the busy summer months. Business owners are still scrambling to add to their staff, using a combination of placement agencies, job fairs and outright stealing.

“People are sniping other people’s workers,” said Jane Nichols Bishop, a workforce consultant assisting several Cape Cod business owners. “You think you’ve got them and the paperwork is out and then they call and say they’ve got a better job offer. This is the year of the worker, not the employer.”

Nichols Bishop estimated she has filled approximately 60 percent of her clients’ requests for workers. She has been looking for staff only in the U.S. or H2B foreign workers already in the country. New H2B visas for foreign workers are impossible to get because the 33,000 annual cap on summer visas was filled in January, before many local business owners had put through their visa paperwork.

Tom Conklin, general manager of Bubala’s by the Bay, a popular restaurant on Commercial Street that in the past has depended on H2B workers from Jamaica, said he had hired enough staff to open on May 8 but still lacked enough people to work the summer season.

“One day at a time,” he said, describing how he was dealing with the worker shortage. “We all have big families. The extended family got the call” to be ready to work.

Linda Vital, co-owner of the Coffee Pot, located on Lopes Square, is dealing with two problems: replacing the foreign workers she had depended on in the past and adding additional staff members to work in the space next door, into which the Coffee Pot is in the process of expanding. She picked a difficult time to grow from a take-out coffee and sandwich store to a sit-down restaurant with 20 seats.

Thus far, Vital has hired four H2B workers who came into the country last fall under the winter visa quota but who have extended their stay through the summer. She has also hired four foreign students coming here on a J1 work-study visa. That’s eight people, when she had originally hoped to hire between nine and 12. Not only does Vital have to pay to train the new workers, she has had other costs this year, including fees to recruiters to find the workers and \$1,000 that went into forming an H2B lobbying group.

“We’re going to have to put more money in. We have to get this settled,” Vital said about the lobbying group.

The growing concern over how and where to find the needed seasonal workers has led to the hiring of some possibly questionable people. Rumors have been circulating that one placement agency had been hiring former convicts to come to Provincetown. The truth isn’t quite as bad as it sounds. The agency in question, Select Staffing, with offices in Hyannis and Plymouth, placed several workers with various local businesses, including the Lobster Pot, the Crown & Anchor Inn, the Provincetown Inn and the Mayflower Café. One of those male workers was allegedly raped on April 2 by another man, Dominique Brown, who police said was not working for Select Staffing but who told them he had an interview scheduled with the employment agency. Brown was arrested and is currently awaiting a pre-trial hearing.

Another Select Staffing hire, Anthony Haith, had been hired at the Lobster Pot but never showed up for work because he was arrested on April 2 on an outstanding warrant. Joy McNulty, owner of the Lobster Pot, said she didn’t know about Haith’s record and that he never showed up for work. She said she was “very pleased” with Select Staffing.

McNulty has depended on H2B workers more than most of the businesses in Provincetown. She said she is still short 15 employees for the summer season and has exhausted most of the hiring outlets. Instead, her regular workers have volunteered to work extra shifts to make up the gaps.

"They'll do doubles here instead of going to their second jobs. But then there is no backup. There's nobody to pull from because they're all working," McNulty said.

There are a few businesses in town that are not having problems, usually the smaller shops that don't need many workers. Dennis Lemenager, owner of Utilities, a kitchen, bath and home supply store at 393 Commercial St., said he hires four year-round employees, two part-time seasonal workers and himself to man the store. Most of his hires come from positive word of mouth, like his most recent hire, Scott Powell, a year-round resident who knew about the store from a friend who works there.

"I'm really lucky," Lemenager said. "I don't have the need for 50 people."

psowers@provincetownbanner.com