

The Patriot Ledger

Cape Cod businesses scrambling for workers

Congress hasn't renewed provision allowing thousands of seasonal workers to return to U.S.

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QUINCY — BOSTON – With comprehensive immigration reform likely shelved until after the November elections, Sen. Edward Kennedy's office is pushing for a short-term solution for Cape Cod businesses that find themselves scrambling for workers as the summer tourism season heats up.

Restaurants and hotels on the Cape often depend on seasonal workers, especially immigrants, to fill their ranks. Many of these employees, in turn, rely on H-2B visas supplied by the federal government that allow temporary entry to the country for seasonal work.

But with last year's collapse of immigration reform in Congress, the expected renewal of a provision to exempt returning seasonal workers from counting toward the cap on H-2B visas failed.

Currently, 66,000 seasonal workers are allowed into the United States each year, a quota that was filled in January by companies requiring workers in the winter. With the expiration of the returning worker provision, thousands of experienced workers are now unable to enter the country.

"Action by Congress is urgently needed to see that businesses in the Commonwealth and across the country have the employees they need," Kennedy said in an e-mailed statement. "American workers should always be first in line for these jobs, but the H-2B program is a vital backup when enough American workers aren't available."

In the case of Cape businesses, seasonal immigrant workers had become an integral part of the workforce, and the lack of available visas presents a considerable challenge.

"I think this summer we're going to see hotel owners and managers making beds and we're going to see restaurant owners behind the lines cooking," said Rep. Sarah Peake of Provincetown.

Richard Neitz, chairman of the board of the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce, said the shortage of workers sparked "fears that it could have a devastating effect on hours being cut back and menus being cut back" for Cape businesses. Neitz added, however, that most chamber member companies had aggressively sought help from local workers and would scrape by.