

Cape employers left scrambling Immigration impasse has high season arriving without foreign workers

By Jenna Russell, Globe Staff | April 11, 2008

Facing a looming labor shortage at their busiest time of year because of the standoff in Congress over immigration policy, seasonal businesses on Cape Cod, Nantucket, and Martha's Vineyard are scouring distant states and nearby cities for workers.

Cape employers, who have relied for years on more than 5,000 seasonal workers from Jamaica, Bulgaria, Poland, and other countries, say they are unlikely to find replacements for all the cooks, waiters, housekeepers, and landscapers they need this summer. Some businesses are delaying openings, cutting back hours, and making plans to get by with fewer employees.

"Right now I'm hearing from employers who are beyond anxious," said Jane Nichols Bishop, a consultant on Cape Cod who assists businesses seeking foreign workers. "Some of my clients are delaying their openings by a month or more, or not booking all their rooms, because they don't have enough staff."

Among those they hope will help fill their vacant jobs are unemployed people from New Bedford and Fall River, foreign laborers winding down the season at Florida resorts, and local students and retirees willing to be coaxed into the labor force.

The peculiar demographics of the Cape make seasonal hiring especially hard for employers. Demand for labor fluctuates wildly between summer and winter, there are fewer teenagers and young adults than elsewhere in the state, and the older population is much larger: Twenty-nine percent of residents in Barnstable County are over 60, compared with 18 percent statewide, said Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.

"The demographic problem is not going away, and it's probably going to get worse," he said.

For years, the Cape and islands have filled the gap with labor imported from abroad, hiring far more visa workers than any other part of Massachusetts. But because of ongoing disagreement over immigration legislation, Congress has not voted to renew the program that allows large numbers of seasonal foreigners to enter the country legally with temporary work visas.

Now, Cape officials say, any such vote would probably come too late to help them this season, because it could take the government weeks or months to process the paperwork necessary to hire people from overseas.

On Nantucket, where summer brings half a million visitors but the resident labor pool is fixed, businesses that have relied in the past on 1,000 foreign workers are scrambling for help, said Tracy Bakalar, Chamber of Commerce director. The chamber held a job fair at Nantucket High School yesterday, but the school has only 400 students.

"Advance bookings have been good, but I want to make sure people have good service when they come, because if they don't, they probably won't come back," Bakalar said.

At Tresses salon and spa on Nantucket, owner Theresa Davis said she does not expect to find replacements for most of the 13 to 15 workers she usually hires from the Dominican Republic. (She said that group includes five sisters who consider her "their Nantucket mother.")

To prepare for the shortage, Davis is booking fewer weddings and planning to cut hours, while continuing to lobby Congress for help.

"I feel embarrassed to tell my clients, 'Yes, I'm in business, but no, I can't take your business,'" she said. "It's very frustrating, because so many businesses are trying to do it the right way, with people who come into the country legally."

To address the need, Nichols Bishop has canvassed winter resorts in Florida, California, and Arizona, seeking foreign workers who are already in the country on a temporary work visa, known as an H-2B, and are willing to extend their stay up to the maximum 36 months allowed so they can take a summer job in Massachusetts. Between 175 and 200 people, including Jamaicans, Brazilians, and Filipinos, have agreed to work for Cape employers who are filing paperwork to extend their stays, she said. But their numbers will not be enough.

"Most of them are not going to do this," said Nichols Bishop. "A lot of people go home. They have families, or they go to school. That's what H-2B people do; they're not immigrants."

Hoping to tap supplies of labor close by, the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce is helping businesses recruit workers from Fall River and New Bedford, where unemployment rates are higher than on the Cape. A job fair yesterday in Westport was expected to attract about 10 large employers with hundreds of jobs to fill, said Wendy Northcross, director of the chamber. Another recruiting session will be held Monday in Hyannis.

Brenda Francis, director of the Greater New Bedford Career Center, said job seekers there were intrigued by a recent appeal from a large Martha's Vineyard employer, which promised employee housing at a reduced cost.

Employers who cannot offer housing may be helped by the startup this month of a new daily bus service from Providence to Cape Cod, which will include stops in New Bedford and Fall River. The CAPEX bus, operated by a private transportation company, was conceived as a service for passengers using the airport in Warwick, R.I., but the company's owners have offered to make the route useful for workers commuting to Cape Cod, Northcross said.

Some leaders see potential in the Cape's large retiree population. Doug Dexter, a former selectman in Sandwich, said he is working to connect retirees who want to get back in the workforce with businesses that would value their expertise.

"A lot of people we talk to would like to earn some supplemental income, and they want to be back in the work environment because they miss the camaraderie," he said. "Employers love them because they show up for work every day."

With no sign of resolution to the immigration debate, it remains unclear when or whether foreign workers will return to the Cape, and how much of the shift away from their labor will be permanent.

"Employers have to be willing to change their habits," said Northcross, "so some of these [ideas] may not take until next year."

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