

Cape employers look beyond bridges



Christopher Power, 17, of Fall River fills out an application for the Chatham Bars Inn at a job fair in Westport yesterday. CAPE COD TIMES/Paul Blackmore

By **Patrick Cassidy**
STAFF WRITER
April 11, 2008

WESTPORT — If they can get here they will come.

The frequent refrain at a job fair for Cape Cod employers held yesterday on the South Coast highlighted one of the problems the peninsula faces in its annual struggle to fill seasonal positions by attracting off-Cape laborers.

"That's probably the biggest concern," said Joe Ferreira, who attended the event at White's of Westport with his daughter, Nicole. "How would she get there?"

Nicole Ferreira was one of the dozens of young faces at the hotel that could show up for summer work on the Cape this year, but the 19-year-old and her father were also among those who carefully weighed travel time and expense against potential pay.

"As soon as they say there's no transportation, it's not even worth filling out an application," Joe Ferreira said.

Hyannis, for example, is approximately 60 miles from Fall River. For a car that gets 20 miles to the gallon the round trip would cost about \$20 in gas.

Some of the Cape restaurants and hotels at White's yesterday said they could accommodate workers who need a ride from the Fall River and New Bedford area. A representative from MassRIDES — a state service that organizes "vanpools" for commuters — was also on hand with information.

But whether the job/worker/transportation connections that come out of the event and other outreach efforts will be enough to keep Cape businesses fully staffed this summer remains to be seen.

The region's need for employees to turn down beds and cook burgers for tourists is especially acute this year because of a short supply of foreign workers through the H-2B visa program.

Each year, between 5,000 and 6,000 foreign workers come to the Cape and islands on H-2B visas.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced that a 66,000 visa cap on H-2Bs was hit Jan. 3, well before many local employers were prepared to apply.

An exemption for former H-2B workers has been tied up in the national immigration debate, leaving the region struggling for help. Yesterday's fair, and a second one planned for Monday in Hyannis, are the result of a request by the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce for aid from the state.

The New Bedford area was chosen for the first job fair because of its higher-than-state-average unemployment rate and proximity to the Cape.

The state Office of Labor and Workforce Development provided \$15,000 to advertise the events, said Kristina Dower, director of Career Opportunities, a Hyannis-based organization that organizes the job fairs.

Dower and other organizers hope to help fill hundreds of positions during the two events, but that is only a small fraction of what is needed, she said.

The Cape chamber is meeting with workforce development officials around New Bedford to discuss a longer term partnership, Wendy Northcross, the chamber's executive director, said yesterday.

But it is probably too late for returning H-2B worker to fill the gap, Northcross said.

Instead local businesses are turning to student visas and H-2B workers already in other parts of the country, she said. Whatever the solution, all indicators are that business will be good this summer, Northcross said.

Because of increasing gas prices and the declining value of the dollar, Northcross expects New England vacationers and foreign tourists to visit the Cape, instead of traveling to more exotic locales.

But without the H-2Bs, it is unclear who will serve the throngs of tourists.

"I usually get about 60 to 65 H-2Bs," said Sally Bowles, director of human resources for the Catania Hospitality Group, a company that runs the Hearth n' Kettle restaurants and the Cape Codder Resort and Spa.

The H-2B workers serve as the core employee-base because they are able to stay for nine months, unlike students who must leave early to return to school, Bowles said.

However, unlike others in attendance yesterday, Bowles is in the enviable position of having a transportation option for her employees. The company's executive housekeeper lives about 15 minutes from White's and can pick up employees from the area in a 15-seat van.

By 11 a.m., Bowles had spoken with about 20 potential employees. But Catania has more than 200 positions to fill before the season heats up, she said.

Dave Schneider, vice president of Cape Cod Restaurants Inc. was looking for 10 line cooks.

He had spoken to about a dozen people and had several interviews set up for today, he said.

But Cape Cod Restaurants tries to house its employees locally and Schneider doubted how easy it would be to transport workers from afar.

"If they can do it, good for them," he said. "I think it'd be a logistical nightmare."

About a dozen applicants arrived at the job fair in a small bus from the local chapter of Youth Build, a national organization that provides job training and education to low-income people ages 16 to 24.

The youth group is made up of mostly high school dropouts working toward their GED diploma, said Youth Build case manager Ira Joseph.

Some said they applied for their first "real" jobs yesterday.

"I've personally never had a job, job," said Tara Pestana, 16, of Fall River.

Pestana and her friend Sopheap Chao, 18, applied to the Chatham Bars Inn to be housekeepers. "It seems like people I'd like to work for," Pestana said about the representatives from the high-end Chatham inn.

The girls would need to get a ride to the Cape from a friend in the near future but both expected to get their licenses soon.

Patrick Cassidy can be reached at pcassidy@capecodonline.com.

Struggling to find help

- Cape and Islands employers apply for between 5,000 and 6,000 foreign H-2B workers each year.
- An exemption for former H-2B workers has been tied up in the national immigration debate, leaving the region struggling for help.
- The U.S. House Immigration Subcommittee will hold a hearing Wednesday to discuss the H-2B visas. William Zammer, owner of Cape Cod Restaurants, is scheduled to testify.
- The unemployment rate in 2007 for the New Bedford area was 6.4 percent. Statewide the unemployment rate was 4.5 percent. The unemployment rate on Cape Cod was 4.8 percent.