

Cape struggles without H-2B labor

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July 27, 2008

Most summers, 53 workers come from Jamaica to Provincetown to staff the kitchen at the Lobster Pot. This summer, because of federal visa limitations, only 16 employees made it.

And though it's more than most Cape businesses were able to get this year, 16 is not nearly enough, Lobster Pot owner Joy McNulty said.

"It's a terrible, terrible, nightmare this year," she said.

McNulty has worked with temporary employment agencies to fill the vacant positions. However, the employees she has found this way require extensive training and often fail to show up for their scheduled shifts, she said.

"My customers are not getting the service they should get, my staff is exhausted," she said. "It's almost impossible."

Two months into the summer tourist season, employers across the Cape report seeing their businesses suffer from their inability to get authorization for the seasonal foreign workers on which they have come to depend.

"We're really saddened that we weren't able to get the people who were with us for 10 years," said Gregory Stone, one of the owners of the Lighthouse Inn. The West Dennis hotel was unable to bring back more than a dozen of its regular foreign staff members. "We've had long-term relationships with those folks."

Every summer, about 5,000 employees come to the Cape and Islands on H-2B visas, which allow them to stay for nine months to work in restaurants, hotels and other seasonal businesses.

A federal cap limits the number of H-2B visas that can be issued each year to 66,000. For the past several years, however, Congressional action has loosened that restriction.

No such move took place this year, however, and on Jan. 3, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced that the cap had been reached.

Because the visa application process can only be started 120 days before workers are needed, almost no Cape businesses had yet filed the necessary paperwork.

The results for Cape hotels, restaurants and retailers have been severe, according to several businesses.

To fill the empty positions, employers have looked for workers in a number of places. Some have recruited more aggressively among the local population; others have hired foreign college students on a different type of visa known as a J-1, which only allows them to stay in the country until school resumes.

Some have been able to find employees who worked in other areas on H-2B visas over the winter and were able to extend their authorization.

"It's been like a patchwork of solutions," said Wendy Northcross, CEO of the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce.

Training and turnover are the two biggest concerns owners and managers cited.

"The problem has been that, where many of them are new, training a far larger percentage of new crew has definitely taxed our managers," said Patrick Patrick, a manager at Marine Specialties, a Provincetown army-navy store.

The shop has, in previous summers, employed 10 to 15 H-2B workers from eastern European countries.

This year, it has mostly filled the gaps by hiring J-1 workers. The store attempted to hire locals for seasonal positions, but only received two applications, Patrick said.

For most of the summer, the demands of training so many new employees forced the store to cut back its hours.

"We just now got the crew well enough trained to go back on full schedule," Patrick said last week.

At restaurants owned by William Zammer, which include the Coonamessett Inn and the Flying Bridge in Falmouth, training has also been an issue.

He was able to recruit some H-2B workers from winter destinations as the ski season ended, but these employees don't know the positions the way Zammer's usual Jamaican workers do.

The restaurants have also been unable to find enough local workers.

"Its been a real tough struggle," he said. "We've been working a lot of overtime."

These staffing issues have also pushed the restaurants to trim some items from the menus and limit the number of tables they can seat at one time, Zammer said.

The Provincetown Inn, which usually employs 15 to 20 H-2B workers, is struggling to retain the staff it does find, general manager Larry Lisnoff said.

"We've hired a lot of new people, but there's been a lot of turnover already," he said. "Front desk staffing has been very difficult."

Matters will only get worse, said many, when Labor Day rolls around and college students — both local and foreign — have to return to school.

"The end of the summer is going to be a disaster," Patrick said.

As for next year, there is little optimism that the visa problems will have been resolved by the time summer 2009 hits. The chances of action are "slim," said Mark Forest, spokesman for U.S. Rep. William Delahunt, who represents the Cape and Islands.

With the presidential election looming, action is unlikely on any issue that touches on immigration.

"Immigration is going to continue to be a politically volatile issue," Forest said.

And by the time the new president is inaugurated on Jan. 20, 2009, it may already be too late to pass legislation that could have any impact.

"We're looking at another year of this," Zammer said.