

The Boston Globe

Division of labor

Immigration debate cuts Cape's summer worker supply

By Tania deLuzuriaga,
Globe Staff | August 29, 2008



Julia Cumes for The Boston Globe Judy Pihl (left), co-owner of The Inn at Duck Creeke and the Duck Creeke Tavern, spoke with new hostess Vesna Dumenzic at the tavern in Wellfleet. (Julia Cumes for The Boston Globe)

WELLFLEET - With summer in full swing, vacationers are clogging the restaurants, shops, and inns of this town on the outer reaches of Cape Cod. But behind the counters, in the kitchens and back rooms, it is another story. Help is in very short supply.

The seasonal visa program that for years has supplied thousands of foreign workers to Cape Cod and the islands each summer has been entangled in Congress's contentious immigration debate, and business owners are struggling to manage high-season workloads with skeleton staffs.

Across the Cape, businesses that cater to tourists say labor shortages are forcing them to cut back on services and pay large amounts of overtime to the small number of workers they have found. Many owners are frantically trying to handle unfilled jobs themselves.

"We all joke that we're losing weight," said Judy Pihl, an inn and tavern keeper who has lived in Wellfleet since 1974. "Everyone is moving faster and longer. But the public comes in with expectations, and you don't want them to know that you're short-staffed."

On Martha's Vineyard, the amount of overtime paid for bus drivers has tripled from last year. At Wellfleet's The Wicked Oyster, the staff shortage has meant that the restaurant no longer serves lunch. And at nearby Mac's Seafood, owner Mac Hay is planning to close for the season two weeks early.

"I can't emphasize enough how much of a strain this has put on us," Hay said.

In past years, some 7,000 workers arrived on the Cape with temporary H-2B visas allowing them in the country to work during the busy summer months. But the flow of workers was cut off this year when Congress, locked in a battle over revamping immigration laws, balked at renewing the seasonal visa program. As a result, the number of seasonal visas available nationwide was cut almost in half. Those visas were quickly snapped up by winter resorts, which are allowed to file paperwork earlier than employers who hire for the summer.

For employers like Hay, it has meant that the seasoned employees who returned to his restaurant's kitchen year after year could not come this summer. He hired 30 new employees at the beginning of the season who needed to be trained on everything from handling food to working the cash register. He estimated that the additional training added about 1,000 hours to his payroll.

"You can sustain a hit like that one year," he said. "But at some point, you start to wonder why you're doing it."

Businesses have filled their ranks in several ways. Some, like Hay, have hired foreign workers who were already in the country with seasonal work visas and then were granted extensions. Others, like Pihl, turned to international students who entered the country through a separate visa program that allows them to work for three or four months at a time. But the students return home at the end of the month, leaving her with a shortage for September and October. And most J-1 visa workers aren't allowed to return for a second season, which means she will have a new crop to train next spring.

"They can't be fully trained in a few weeks," she said, noting that she has been working 16-hour days doing everything from stocking the bar to parking cars to folding sheets in order to cover the gaps in her staff.

"Because they're not trained you have to be there," she said. "You constantly have to be present."

On Martha's Vineyard, the Regional Transit Authority has hired more retirees and islanders working second jobs. But the agency is still down by about 10 drivers, and the quality of service isn't what it usually is, said Angela Grant, Transit Authority administrator.

"We're probably a little more tolerant because demand is so high," she said. "It hasn't been a great year . . . complaints are up."

Critics of the seasonal visa program say businesses should hire more Americans instead of relying on foreign workers, but Cape employers say few US citizens on the Cape are interested in the jobs they offer.

"They don't want this kind of job," Pihl said. "The Americans don't want to start as dishwashers or busboys. They want to be waiters and bartenders."

"Americans want year-round employment with insurance," Grant said. "That's not what we provide."

Though they're in the midst of their high season now, business owners are worried about what they're going to do next year. With the immigration issue at an impasse in Congress, the problem isn't likely to be remedied soon.

"We are suggesting to people that they want to plan for the worst," said Mark Forest, a spokesman for US Representative William D. Delahunt. "We're telling them they have to prepare for another season where they do what they have been doing."

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