



## Island shortages likely as visa limits reached

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Island businesses are again bracing themselves for staffing shortages this summer after the federal government announced the quota had been reached on its seasonal H-2B visas, which permit foreign workers into the country for nine months at a time.

Seasonal businesses on Nantucket and Cape Cod rely on the foreign help to take those menial jobs Americans are generally reluctant to perform, said Nantucket Chamber of Commerce executive director Tracy Bakalar. Each year only 66,000 H-2B visas are granted, less than half the demand, in two seasonal waves. Estimates indicate around 1,000 H-2B workers filled island jobs each summer in recent years.

Employers may apply for the visa no earlier than 120 days before the position's opening, making it impossible for summer businesses in the Northeast to place requests should caps be reached in early January as they were the past two years by employers in southern resort communities or ski towns.

"It's a problem that's been continuing to build over the last 10 years," said Mark Forest, Congressman William Delahunt's chief of staff. "There's growing national competition for seasonal workers and the fixed cap is out of date and needs modernization."

Bakalar said shady, ticket-scalping-like tactics are partly to blame. Large brokerage agencies apply for many visas and essentially sell off blocks of visa-holding workers at marked-up fees. She said the practice has drawn the attention of politicians such as Delahunt and U.S. Sen. John Kerry.

"There is an element of that (visa brokerage houses)," said Forest. "There's a lot of interest in trying to do something about that. It will be one of the issues that will be looked at."

Last year's staffing shortage strained workers and business owners who were often forced to log 80-hour weeks to keep up with customer demand, Bakalar said.