

July 20th, 2008

It's stable but not business as usual

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PROVINCETOWN -

Early this year, when it became clear that returning foreign workers would not be granted their seasonal H-2B visas, business owners panicked, predicting dire circumstances ranging from reduced services to shorter hours to closing altogether.

The reality as of mid-July has not turned out to be as earth-shattering as originally envisioned. However, an informal survey of local business owners and managers shows that while the impact of the loss of returning workers varies, few have been able to proceed with business as usual.

As might be expected, the larger businesses are having the most difficulty, since they require a large number of seasonal employees. At Cape Inn Resorts, a 139-room motel and lounge at the far east end of town, replacing the H-2B workers has proved problematic. Fred Sateriale Jr., the resort's general manager, said he was able to increase the number of foreign workers hired through the federal J-1 visa program, which allows an unlimited number of college students, mostly from Europe, into the country to work and travel during the summer. Sateriale also hired some H-2B workers who were able to extend their winter visa for six months, moving from winter jobs in the south up to Cape Cod.

However, it still has not been enough. Cape Inn closed its dining room for dinner this summer as a result of an employee shortage, limiting food service to a lounge menu and take-out.

"The dining room was the least profitable part. So we concentrated on getting rooms rented and cleaned. One of our cooks is now a housekeeper," Sateriale said.

In addition, the Cape Inn offered a \$10 a night refund to customers during the Memorial Day weekend because the J-1 staff hadn't arrived yet and there weren't enough employees to clean the rooms. And Sateriale has been forced to offer housing to three new staff members, a first for the resort.

"I have rooms that go for \$175 a night that I now have employees in paying nothing," he said.

At Bayside Betsy's, a waterfront restaurant, J-1 workers are helping fill the staffing gap. But co-owner Steve Melamed said he had to hire three extra people this year, what he called "supplemental staff," to make up for a lack of experienced, trained workers. In addition to needing training, the language skills of many of the J-1 workers are not sufficient to allow them to interact directly with customers, relegating most of them to bussing tables or kitchen prep.

Consistency has also been a problem. Melamed said many of the J-1 workers "switch around a lot" in terms of jobs. While an American employer has to sponsor a student for a J-1 visa, there is no requirement that the student actually work for that employer.

"We started originally requesting nine or 11 J-1s. We don't have an original J-1 left that was sent to us by our agency," he said.

The other problem looming on the horizon for employers using J-1 students is that they often quit in August, wanting to travel before returning home for the beginning of the school year. Candy Collins-Boden, executive director of the Provincetown Chamber of Commerce, said that while she has not heard a lot of complaints from managers about the summer season, she thinks the fall shoulder season "may be problematic."



By Staff Photo/Pru Sowers

Adrienne DuBois, an assistant manager for Cuffy's of Cape Cod, said the retail store is turning away young people looking

Still, the sky has not fallen, as many predicted back in January, when the town hurriedly put together a survey of local businesses in an effort to determine the scope of the problem the town was facing. Of the 111 Provincetown and Truro businesses that responded, about one-quarter of the total, the town estimated that 809 full- and part-time foreign workers needed to be found. Several of the businesses said they feared dire circumstances. Lorraine's said it might close or be open weekends only. Big Daddy's Burritos in the Aquarium Mall said that it would shorten its hours and/or consider moving and relocating the business.

However, Lorraine's is open seven days a week this month. And Michael Sullivan, co-owner of Big Daddy's, said on Monday that his fears have not come to pass. There has been virtually no problem hiring the five workers needed to operate the fast food burrito restaurant. He attributed it to the high number of referrals from past employees and the fact that the restaurant pays a good wage.

"We saw the same amount of kids with the same level of skills coming," he said. "My assumption [on the survey] was the big places would take away all the Eastern European people. But we didn't see it happen."

Cuffy's of Cape Cod, a "buy two, get three free" casual clothing store, at first glance should have had significant staffing shortages. Not only did the store expand into the next-door building, it opened a second location almost directly across the street. But Adrienne DuBois, the assistant manager, said they have had more people looking for work than they can handle.

"We have kids coming in every day asking for applications. And business is down a bit so we're going to have to lay a few off," she said.

DuBois said Cuffy's, like Big Daddy's Burritos, benefited from referrals from past staffers. And while most of the employees are J-1 visa holders, their return to their home country is usually staggered over September and October, about the time Cuffy's business will be slowing enough to be handled by the year-round staff, she said.

But there have been some unexpected ripple effects from the lack of returning H-2B workers, the majority of which came from Jamaica. Mike Trovato, owner of Joe & Son Appliance, usually hired the same two Jamaican workers each summer. This year, only one came back to work. While Trovato found a second full-time worker, he has been unable to hire the occasional day laborer to fill in during particularly busy periods.

"If we get short, we could pick up a day laborer before. Now we can't. I'm doing 20 hours a day on delivery and service. I'm way behind," he said, adding, "I didn't realize how much [the H-2B visa shortage] was going to affect me. It's a chain reaction all throughout the town."

And even businesses able to find a full complement of workers are feeling some stress. Bubala's By the Bay, a popular eatery with outside dining, hires approximately 75 people each summer, of which about half used to be returning workers from Jamaica. A clearly fed-up manager filling out the town survey in January said if foreign workers weren't available, Bubala's was contemplating tearing down the restaurant and turning it into a parking lot.

While that did not happen, the stress of hiring and teaching the new workers how to carry out their duties has been wearing. Tom Conklin, general manager, said this week that the new employees need "training, training and more training," requiring managers to put in more hours than usual.

"Business is good but dealing with the help is very difficult," he said. "You get busy and get backed up and they're f---ing up in the kitchen. You have to tell them something for the 15th time."

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