

The Berkshire Eagle

Patrick urges visa reform

By Matt Murphy, Eagle Boston Bureau
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BOSTON — Gov. Deval L. Patrick took the lead yesterday in a multistate effort to pressure Congress to expand its guest worker program for one year to blunt the impact of a shortage of seasonal workers in regions that rely on tourism during the summer months.

The letter, written by Patrick and signed by 16 other governors, urged House and Senate leaders in Washington to move quickly to extend the temporary visa program for returning workers for one year as it continues to debate more comprehensive immigration reform.

The leisure and hospitality industry in Berkshire County depends on roughly 3,000 seasonal workers during the peak summer tourism season, according to the Berkshire Regional Employment Board.

Immigration reform has been a controversial topic over the past year on Capitol Hill, as lawmakers have struggled to find a compromise on comprehensive immigration reform. The topic has been made more sensitive by the timing during a presidential election cycle.

For the first time since 2005, Congress failed to extend a provision that did not count returning workers to the United States against the 33,000 cap on H-2B visas for seasonal workers. Because returning workers were counted toward the quota, the limit on visas for the second half of 2008 was reached Jan. 2.

"Each day Congress fails to act adds to the tremendous uncertainty faced by our seasonal businesses," the letter states.

"Time is running out for small businesses across the country which depend on the H-2B visa program to meet their hiring needs during peak seasons. As governors, we urge Congress to immediately pass a one-year stand-alone extension of the H-2B returning worker program," the letter adds.

Patrick was joined by governors from South Carolina, Virginia, South Dakota, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Vermont, Delaware, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Wisconsin and Wyoming in calling for the extension.

Some businesses in the region, including the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge, rely on seasonal workers during the tourism season and have been joining state leaders in urging Congress to resolve the issue.

"It's definitely an issue for us, and we've been writing letters to Congress," said Carol Bauman of the Red Lion Inn.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy and Rep. William Delahunt, both Massachusetts Democrats, have been leading the effort in Washington to extend the H-2B visa program for returning workers for one year to give Congress more time to find a permanent solution.

"Action by Congress is urgently needed to see that businesses in the commonwealth and across the country have the employees they need," Kennedy said in a statement. "American workers should always be first in line for these jobs, but the H-2B program is a vital backup when enough American workers aren't available. Any such program must include strong labor standards to protect the H-2B workers and American workers."