

# The Boston Globe

## Visas denied, dreams in limbo

Jamaican workers mourn loss of jobs on Cape

By Jenna Russell  
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MONTEGO BAY, Jamaica - Every spring, Janet Lawrence packed the faded purple folder in her suitcase full of uniforms and carried it with her from Jamaica to Cape Cod. At night, exhausted after long days serving Chatham tourists, 1,700 miles from her four children, she would study the photo on the cover, showing the rising foundation of her dream house.

The house, on an unpaved road pitted with potholes and bordered by fruit trees, is more than a dream now, a decade after Lawrence and her husband started working seasonal jobs at hotels and restaurants on the Cape. Its spotless tile floors and arched windows look just the way she imagined them, though the airy rooms are mostly empty of furniture, and the garage is vacant, waiting for the car she can't yet afford.

The couple built their home year by year, room by room, spending just what they could save each year. But this summer, instead of working to advance their goals further, the Lawrences and thousands of other ambitious Jamaicans find themselves in a strange limbo.

After migrating to the same summer jobs on Cape Cod and the islands for years, sent for by employers who depended on their well-honed skills, the Cape's Jamaican workers are shut out, blocked from obtaining seasonal work visas because the battle in Congress over overhauling immigration laws has capped the number available, and all were snapped up months ago.

Left to wait and worry, facing idle days and quickly dwindling savings, some Jamaicans feel the disruption in their bones.

"It seems strange to my body, because I'm used to working now, and I'm not doing the tasks I'm accustomed to doing," said Lawrence, 44. "I call it 'worksick,' like homesick."

A world apart in opportunity and wealth, Cape Cod and Jamaica have come to depend on each other, an unlikely symbiosis that has left both places shaken by their sudden separation. Cape employers say the influx of workers has helped fill a choking labor shortage, while Jamaicans say the jobs have allowed them to move toward a living standard that would otherwise be out of reach in their stagnant economy.

In recent years, an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 foreign workers have traveled to the Cape and islands each year on seasonal H2B visas, including more than 1,000 Jamaicans. Almost none will make it this year. It is a seasonal crisis for Cape resorts and merchants, who find themselves scrounging for last-minute hires. But it means much more to those, like Janet Lawrence, cut off from the work they build their year, and lives, around.

Most are employed as housekeepers, cooks, servers, and dishwashers for hotels, restaurants, and landscaping companies, earning hourly wages of \$10 to \$12. If they could find the same jobs in Jamaica, where double-digit unemployment is persistent, workers said they would earn a fraction of the pay - \$50 to \$100 for 40 hours, compared with \$400 on the Cape.

Some small Jamaican communities, where whole families have been drawn into overseas work, are especially hard hit. In Black River, a port town of 6,000 people two hours south of Montego Bay, over winding mountain roads where stately villas alternate with concrete shacks, a dozen former Cape workers, many related by blood, said they remained optimistic for months.

But when June arrived, and the rainy season began, the starkness of their situation began to sink in. And, unlike American teenagers scooping ice cream to buy back-to-school clothes, Jamaican workers serving up fried clams to tourists supported networks of relatives who must now do without. Dwayne Edwards, 25, of rural Black River, sent home \$100 of his earnings every week to help his mother, two aunts, and four siblings. Now, he says, their bills are backing up.

"At this time, I would be getting ready to go to work," said Edwards, a former server at Mac's Seafood in Wellfleet, glancing at his watch at noon one sultry day last week. "I think that every day."

Merlene McDonald, a housekeeper at the Provincetown Inn, was the first from her family to go to the Cape, 15 years ago, seeking a better life for her six children. The house she started building 20 years ago was finally finished two years ago, next to a sugar cane field; in the small, immaculate living room, her framed employee-of-the-month certificates hang on the wall, describing her as "the quiet one who never quits."

McDonald, 58, worries what will happen in the fall, when her grandchildren go back to school and the bills for their books and fees are due.

"They have to go back somehow," the soft-spoken matriarch said.

Few of the Jamaican workers have found new jobs in their native country, and many said their Cape résumés count against them when they seek work at Jamaican resorts: Prospective employers tell them they are too likely to leave when the route to the United States is clear again.

The ties between the two tourist destinations go back two decades, to 1988, when a Cape woman, Jane Haist (then Jane Zimmerman) arranged summer dishwashing jobs for nine acquaintances she had met on travels in Jamaica. Word spread, and dozens of Jamaicans lined up on front porches to meet Haist on her next trip. Within a few years, she was matching hundreds of eager workers with labor-hungry employers.

"I had no idea what was going to happen," said Haist. "But they took pride in the jobs, and that was the golden apple."

That came to a halt this year when Congress, locked in a standoff over overhauling immigration laws, balked at renewing the seasonal visa program, freezing the number of visas for seasonal workers at 66,000. Those visas were quickly snared by winter resorts, which are allowed to file paperwork earlier than Cape employers.

The Jamaicans, along with thousands of other workers from Eastern Europe, Mexico, and the Caribbean, were effectively stranded. No one knows when, or if, the cap will be lifted.

Critics say Cape employers should not rely on foreign labor at all but rather they should pay wages high enough to attract American workers.

Employers say most Americans will not do the dirty work embraced by less privileged foreigners - or they will not do it well or reliably - and those who would work hard expect a year-round paycheck.

Jamaicans, who typically work on the Cape from March or April through November or December, say the work and time away from home is worth it, to give their children better lives than they had.

"If I worked in Jamaica, I would probably have children sleeping in one room, or in the hall," said Lawrence, who keeps a pair of small ceramic lighthouses from Chatham on a living room shelf. "When you're able to have your children be safe, and not go outside to use the bathroom, that means a lot."

This year, the workers said there is little to do but pray and hope.

Last week, a dozen former Cape workers sat on wooden benches in a simple church and talked about "traveling" - the word they use as shorthand for their seasonal work on the Cape.

Marie Smith, 38, a daughter of McDonald, said she prays every day about her family's lost jobs.

"I say, 'C'mon, Jesus, for how long?' " she said, raising her voice to be heard over a thunderstorm that pounded the tin roof. "Is this your way of closing this door? Because if it is, you're going to have to open another one."

"I believe He will open another door," she said. "But it's dark right now." ■