



Demand remains for foreign workers

High unemployment rate has little effect on seasonal hiring



Ilma Katiliute, 21, of Utena, Lithuania, left, and Alexandra Mirchevska, 21, of Tetovo, Macedonia, at an ice cream social for seasonal workers at the York Beach Fire Station last August. Katiliute was working at Wild Kingdom and Mirchevska was at Pizza by Paris. Scott Yates/syates@seacoastonline

By **Susan Morse**

smorse@seacoastonline.com

April 18, 2010

YORK, Maine — Overseas workers continue to fill summer jobs at York and Hampton, N.H., beaches, even as unemployment stands above 8 percent in Maine and higher than 7 percent in New Hampshire.

The two states are still ranked within the top 19 states boasting the lowest unemployment rates, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The demand remains to have overseas workers — many of them students from Eastern Europe — fill seasonal jobs that Americans are hesitant to take, said those interviewed. These include cashiering and room cleaning, jobs that pay minimum wage and above.

"We're filling jobs people don't want to do," said Kristina Williamson, regional manager for Cultural Homestay International. Williamson works out of Hampton.

Chuck Rage, a Hampton Beach precinct commissioner, said he receives hundreds of e-mails from overseas students looking for work.

"In the hotel business, we don't seem to get kids who want to clean rooms," said Rage, who owns the Pelham Resort Motel and Pelham Court in Hampton Beach. "American kids are a little spoiled. They leave early. Parents tell them they work hard all summer, take the last two weeks off."

He hires about 20 overseas students so "when the season comes down to a close, we still have staff," Rage said. "I have students coming from Lithuania, Russia and the Czech Republic. Their visa allows them to work four months."

Rage hires local students for another of his businesses, Rexall Drug on the beach. He's not seeing many adults apply, he said.

"I have seen a couple," he said, "they're all shopping around right now."

In York Beach, Williamson said she is filling about the same number of seasonal positions she did last year and in previous years, before the recession. She places an estimated 30 overseas students in York, said Williamson, who declined to name the businesses who hire the workers.

"I am probably the smallest of the sponsors supplying students in York," she said.

Another sponsor, the Council of International Educational Exchange out of Portland, referred comment to an e-mail address. There was no response by Friday's deadline.

The biggest problem in placing overseas students in York is finding housing, said Williamson and David Peck, co-owner of the Lobster Cove and The Goldenrod in York Beach.

"York, Maine, is the most difficult area, the worst area for me (for housing)," Williamson said.

Peck expects to hire few overseas workers due in large part, he said, to trouble finding a place for them to stay during the summer when space is at a premium.

"Housing is a difficult problem," Peck said. "I house them wherever I can find spots for them."

In Hampton, Rage said he solved the housing problem by having a small cottage available at the beach for the students. Before he did that, he said, the workers would be "skipping around" to other jobs to find the best places to stay.

Peck hires 150 seasonal workers for The Goldenrod in York Beach center and another 50 at Lobster Cove along Long Sands Beach. This year, few will be from overseas, he said.

"Last year, I probably had a dozen from Eastern Europe," he said. "This year, I don't expect to have more than three or four. We've had as many as 25 in the past."

There's enough of a local work force available that he doesn't have to look outside of the Seacoast for seasonal help, he said.

"There's a lot more people around now available to work," Peck said. "Because there's so many people available to work, I don't have that need."

Yet, he is still looking for help this summer, he said, as is the Anchorage Inn on Long Sands Beach in York.

"We focus on staying in the local community," said the Anchorage's Erika Christie, human resources manager. She'll be hiring about 15 workers from out of the country this summer, she said, about the same as last year. The Anchorage keeps hiring through August, she said, and the jobs available often pay above the minimum wage.

"We're really reaching out to the labor pool now to actively recruit," she said. "We all work weekends. It's not as appealing to other folks."

Nancy Gustad of York is a former co-chairman of the York Seasonal Worker Program, which acts as a welcome wagon for overseas workers. She and others in the program thought they'd see fewer seasonal workers hired from out of the country during the recession, but that wasn't the case, she said.

"We felt it might happen last summer," she said. "We didn't find that they cut back last year."