

Maine tourism-related businesses struggle to find seasonal workers

By Anne Ravana

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For the past seven years, the Pentagoet Inn in Castine has relied on five temporary foreign workers to take jobs local people aren't interested in — washing dishes, cleaning rooms, changing beds and cooking. This year, changes to the H-2B visa program will make it even more difficult for owners Jack and Julie Burke to fill those positions and keep their business running smoothly.

"It's definitely a crisis," said Jack Burke in a recent interview. "If you're in Bangor or Portland, you're probably not in as much of a pinch because you have a larger pool [of labor] to draw from. But here on the coast, it's tough."

The H-2B visa program offers assistance to seasonal nonagricultural businesses that prove they are unable to hire enough U.S. workers during peak seasons. The visas allow those businesses to hire nonimmigrant, temporary workers who offer short-term help and return to their home country at the end of their season.

H-2B visas are capped at 66,000 visas a year, with a quota of 33,000 in the fall and winter and 33,000 in the spring and summer. But those numbers do not meet the labor needs of seasonal businesses nationwide, and in January U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services already had received enough applications to exceed the cap on H-2B visas for the second half of 2008.

To help fill the demand for H-2B visas, Congress established the H-2B returning worker program in 2005. Under the program, a worker who has received an H-2B visa and worked in the U.S. in one of the three previous fiscal years is not counted toward the 66,000-visa cap. But the returning worker program expired last year.

The Congressional Hispanic Caucus and its supporters have blocked voting on legislation that would reinstate the returning worker program, instead demanding comprehensive immigration overhaul.



Bluenose Inn general manager Kent Leonard, right, moves some furniture to access a phone terminal as he helps Leslie Rodriques (cq) in her seasonal apartment near the Bluenose Inn in Bar Harbor Tuesday, May 20, 2008. Rodriques of Kingston, Jamaica, is a housekeeper at the inn and is among a handful of seasonal employees participating in the U.S. H-2B program who come to the U.S. to supplement labor shortages in seasonal nonagricultural businesses. (Bangor Daily News/John Clarke Russ)

Consequently, as tourists now begin to arrive in Maine, many hotels, resorts, restaurants, landscaping companies, carnivals, seafood processors, pool companies and other members of the tourism industry are without enough workers.

Across the state, 118 employers have submitted applications for 2,041 H-2B positions for the spring-summer tourist season, according to Jorge Acero, employment and training specialist for the Maine Department of Labor.

Most of Maine's H-2B work force is originally from Eastern Europe and Jamaica, Acero said. They are paid what the U.S. Department of Labor calls a prevailing wage, which is usually higher than minimum wage, and employers must provide housing and a plane ticket back to the employee's home country.

But many Maine businesses have found a legal way around the visa restrictions. They have been able to extend legally the visas of workers now in the United States who are finishing up a seasonal winter job, Acero said. For example, with the help of recruiting agents, many Maine hotels have secured workers in Florida, Acero said.

Robert Laltoo, president of the recruiting agency International Work Solutions, based in York, said his business has doubled in recent weeks. He said he knows of at least 1,500 workers in Florida who are looking for jobs in New England for the summer.

"I've been filling requests from my clients and getting requests from other agents to help find workers," Laltoo said in a recent telephone interview from his Miami office. "There is a perfect reciprocal relationship between Florida winter business and New England summer business. There's a surplus of workers in Florida that once they're done with the winter season want to come to New England."

Burke, the innkeeper in Castine, said he has secured two workers from Jamaica and is desperately trying to find a few more to add to his already short staff. He said that by competing with other employers in New England, he is forced to offer workers more incentives, such as free meals and nicer housing, to persuade workers to choose his inn.

In Bar Harbor, General Manager Kent Leonard is seeking up to 35 H-2B visa workers for his Bluenose Inn and Wonder View Inn and two restaurants. He has secured seven workers through agent Linda Turner of ADNIL Employment Services in Brunswick and said he is fairly confident he will be able to find more.

Both Leonard and Burke noted that they have been forced to boost advertising and pay to local workers in an effort to fill positions. For the most part, the local Maine work force prefers long-term employment with benefits such as health insurance, they said. High school and college students can work from June to August, but the summer tourist season runs from May to October, they said.

"It's something we can get past," Leonard said of the worker shortage. "Obviously, we want to maximize the number of people we can find locally, but we know that at peak season it's not going to be enough."