



Visa limits squeeze hospitality labor force

Concern over supply of summer help

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It's an issue that's been on the horizon for several months, but one that is taking on an added urgency as the summer tourist season nears.

A piece of federal legislation has stifled the flow of foreign workers into the United States — a critical source of labor for the hospitality and restaurant industries, a backbone of southern Maine's economy.

In essence, those workers can't get their visas, known as H2B visas, renewed.

"H2B visas are for skilled laborers, like cooks and even supervisor level staff," said Jake Wolterbeek, the owner of Jake's Restaurant and the Hayloft in Wells. "They do this work for a living. They can stay longer into our season than students. They're allowed to stay for what the government says our tourist is, which is seven or eight months."

Under the visa program, which began in 1990, 66,000 visas were authorized for seasonal workers. Wolterbeek said the quota had not been rigidly enforced and that demand for the workers had resulted in far more visas being issued annually.

That changed five years ago.

"The departments of Labor and Immigration had discovered they'd given away 90,000 visas," Wolterbeek said. "The next year, when the number got to 66,000, they cut it off. Employers all over the country begged for relief."

Relief came in the form of a modification to the program, which permitted workers who'd worked successfully for at least three years to return to their employers and not be counted as part of the cap. That worked well, but last year the U.S. Congress, as part of the debate over the disposition of illegal immigrants, failed to renew the returning worker provision.

Until the provision is renewed, none of the workers can return.

"We don't have enough applicants for the jobs we have from local sources," said Allyson Cavaretta of the Meadowmere Resort in Ogunquit. "This year, some have said that (the program) is a way for us to avoid paying minimum wage. That's not true. All the workers earn above that. They're in our bonus program. They get benefits."

In some cases, workers have been at their place of employment for several years.

"I've had a group up from Jamaica for seven years," said Vinny LoBello of Vinny's Restaurant in Ogunquit. "I can't get them back. It's 25 percent of my staff. When they come back year after year, they're also already trained."

LoBello reiterated Cavaretta's claim about hiring difficulties.

"The summer before they started this program was the worst summer I ever had for labor," he said. "There were no responses to any ads. If 10 American kids applied, you'd get maybe two you could depend on to stay for the whole season."

Wolterbeek said 60 percent of the Hayloft's summer kitchen staff is part of the program.

Cavaretta said Meadowere typically had 20 to 25 workers and this year had just 10. Those lower numbers make a difference.

"It means we're all sharing a smaller pool of employees," Cavaretta said. "We have about half as many seasonal staff now. The challenge is to keep the level and quality of service where we like it to be, but we will."

Wolterbeek and LoBello said they might be forced to consider cutting hours.

"If I don't get (the workers) back, I can promise you in the labor pool locally, I won't get the people that I need," Wolterbeek said. "If I only have 40 percent of my staff, I'll be open 40 percent of the time."

LoBello is already closed one day a week as a result.

"I would hate to close a day in the middle of summer or to shorten hours," he said. "But if I have to, I will, and that takes money away from the American workers."

For now, people in the industry hope the Congressional logjam can be broken.

"This (program) is what turns the engine of the biggest industry in Maine," Cavaretta said. "It allows tourism to capitalize on the summer season and have year-round jobs for local people the rest of the time."