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Seasonal spike opens opportunities for foreign workers

Despite recession, Maine's restaurants and hotels are relying on employees from outside the U.S. for summer

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY JOHN CLARKE RUSS
Christine Smith, owner, and Ed Acunto, general manager of the Mount Battie Motel in Lincolnville Beach, Maine.

The national unemployment rate is at 9.4 percent — the highest in 25 years — but foreign seasonal workers are still flocking to Maine's hotels and restaurants for the summer.

“Even in this economy, there's not a lot of people who want to clean hotel rooms,” said Eben Salvatore, director of operations for Bar Harbor's Ocean Properties. “From watching CNN, you'd expect lines out the door. But we're just not that affected up here.”

The company is far from alone. Anecdotally, employers and career center professionals report that the small year-round population in most of the state's tourist destinations, including hot spots in Down East and midcoast Maine, means that many have looked internationally for their labor force — as usual.

“In some parts of the country, there isn't a big enough local work force to deal with the seasonal spike,” said Phil Simon, vice president of the Portland-based Council on International Educational Exchange, which is the country's largest sponsor of J-1 work visas.

Those are what many foreign college students need in order to enter the country.

Salvatore said that his company hires about 80 foreign workers to staff its local properties, including Eastern Europeans, South Africans and Brazilians. Those workers legally enter the country on both J-1 and H2B visas, and the state government is directly involved in hiring to make sure that the process is fair to Maine workers.

“Anyone that responds to our ads, the state sees it first and gets it first, and forwards it to you,” Salvatore said. “It's not like you can hide 50 people who want to work from down the street in order to get foreign help.”

Still, the company would prefer to hire locally, he said.

“You don't have to house them, you don't have to transport them, you eliminate the headache,” Salvatore said.

While Simon said he has seen a 20 percent national decline in the numbers of foreign student workers this year because of the recession, the decline is much higher in states such as Florida than in New England.

Demand for labor has dropped and some students, worried that they might not earn enough money in the United States, have opted to stay home.

“We have been around long enough to see some recessionary cycles and some political cycles,” Simon said, citing the drop in foreign student workers after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as one example.

Nevertheless, he sees that foreign workers traveling with J-1 visas are part of a reliable work force, which is crucial to the tourism industry. Tourism supported about one in six Maine jobs in 2006 and generated \$10 billion in sales, according to the Maine Office of Planning.

‘It was really difficult’

Christine Smith, owner of the Mount Battie Motel just south of Lincolnville Beach, hopes that this summer will be good enough to let her earn a small portion of those sales figures — and she figures that the four college students she has hired from the Eastern European countries of Bulgaria, Moldova and Romania will help make her hope a reality.

“They are incredibly polite, sweet and good workers. We’re thrilled to have them,” she said.

That thrill might be especially acute because last summer brought the kind of employment horror stories that seem like they could have been written by a tourist-season Stephen King.

Because she moved to Maine from Long Island, N.Y., Smith figured she’d like to give back to the community by hiring local workers. It was easier said than done.

“I went through many, many ladies last year,” Smith said. “I had crazy things that happened. Who got thrown out of the house. Whose boyfriend shot whom. All kinds of stuff. There was a lady with arthritic knees who couldn’t bend. It was really difficult.”

And that wasn’t all. She had hired a housekeeper who belatedly explained that she couldn’t work weekends because of her musical gigs as a harpist. Another woman couldn’t afford her depression medication and disappeared for two months. There were people who were interviewed and hired but never showed up at the motel.

Though Smith and General Manager Ed Acunto eventually found a staffing formula that worked, no one made it from the beginning to end of the season.

“They are needy of work, but they don’t want to work,” Acunto said of many of the locals.

Star Perkins, the team leader at the Rockland Career Center, said that unfortunately Smith’s experiences are not unique. High school students are restricted in their work hours by labor laws, and college students by the academic calendar.

“And any of the adults — they’re looking for something year-round,” Perkins said. “Although they may take something seasonal, they tend to hop from one job to another, looking for something more lucrative.”

While she does know of individual Mainers who are extremely loyal to their seasonal employers — sometimes even passing up the chance to qualify for unemployment if they think their employer might need them — all in all, locals are known for moving around.

“I think it’s a shame that folks are finding that local people don’t stay with jobs,” she said. “I wish I could say something more positive ... but because you’re working for such a short period of time, you have to take what you can get, whereas someone who comes from Eastern Europe, they’re trapped here.”

Trip to U.S. worth it

Aleksandar Marvakov, 20, of Bulgaria and Denis Apostolache, 21, of Moldova don’t look at it like that. When the college students made their plans to travel on CIEE-sponsored J-1 visas, they knew that the recession was everywhere. They figured the trip to the United States would be worth it anyway.

Apostolache, a slender young man with intense green eyes, said he wanted to work and travel — and have fun. Marvakov, with a quick smile and a raffishly pierced ear, said he intended to help his parents pay for his education, as well as to see how people live in America.

“So far, everything is all right, I think,” Marvakov said at the Mount Battie’s breakfast table on a rainy Sunday afternoon. “We need only to work more. The weather was no good.”

He studies tourism, and Apostolache studies international economic relations and accounting.

Smith, their summertime boss, said her intentions in hiring the foreign workers were never to slight the midcoast labor community.

“The way I understand it, we are giving students an opportunity to come and experience something that they’re studying,” she said.

“Besides, because the area is one hospitality business after another, there is only so much labor to go around.”

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