

Grand Hotel, others push for new rules on immigrant help

BY TODD SPANGLER • FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF • APRIL 17, 2008

WASHINGTON -- Mackinac Island's Grand Hotel will find enough workers to make it through this summer, but future seasons could be threatened if Congress doesn't loosen rules for immigrant help.

That's the message hotel president R. Daniel Musser III brought to a congressional subcommittee Wednesday as it opened a series of hearings on immigration issues.

As the Free Press reported last month, summer tourist businesses and others across the nation that rely on seasonal immigrants are hurting for workers after Congress allowed an exemption to expire last year. That rule let immigrants who had received a guest worker visa in one of the previous three years return to the United States without counting against a cap on the number of those visas.

The exemption allowed about 130,000 immigrant workers to be employed in the country under what is called the H2B program, but the expiration of the exemption cut that number in half.

That's hurting restaurants on Cape Cod, crab-picking operations in Maryland and, in Michigan, the staffing of hotels.

Musser said the Grand Hotel found about 200 other workers for this summer, recruiting from those already in the country on job passes working at winter resorts in the Southwest and Florida.

But if Congress doesn't make the process less restrictive, he said, that worker pool will become increasingly competitive -- and if a worker goes home to see his or her family, he or she may not be able to come back.

In prepared testimony to the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Musser said the Grand Hotel tries to recruit Americans to work at the hotel, but they aren't available on a seasonal basis. The immigrant workers, he said, "are the lifeblood of our seasonal business."

"Our workforce during the summer is made up of approximately 600 employees -- 250 American citizens and 350 or so H2B workers," he said. "Our American jobs depend on our H2B workers."

Wages, protections among concerns

Some supporters -- including U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee, who has sponsored legislation to restore the exemption -- say the loss of the workers ultimately will cause businesses to close.

But there are plenty of opponents as well, including union members who say immigrant workers are underpaid and mistreated, and activists who say the program leads to illegal immigration by employees who overstay their time in the United States.

Said AFL-CIO President John Sweeney: "Until this program undergoes major reform -- such as a more transparent recruitment process, a meaningful way for workers to enforce promises made to them by employers, access to legal services and receive fair prevailing wages -- Congress should not vote to extend or expand any exemptions."

In written remarks, Mary Bauer, director of the Immigrant Justice Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center, said the workers lack the most fundamental protection -- that of being able to change jobs if mistreated.

"If guest workers complain about abuses, they face deportation, blacklisting or other retaliation," she wrote.

Stupak, whose district includes Mackinac Island, said many abuses lie with foreign labor recruiters, not businesses that hire them.

"Of the more than 70 businesses in northern Michigan, only one business in Mackinaw City and two on Mackinac Island received H2B visas this year," Stupak said.

Musser said there weren't enough H2B slots to bring back the hotel workers, many of whom have worked there for 10 years.

He also took issue with the unions' wage contention, saying he pays the prevailing wage for the region.

"If we didn't pay fair wages ... why would they return for so many years?" he said.