

# PETOSKEY News-Review

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## **Lack of work visas poses challenges for area businesses**

By Ryan Bentley News-Review Staff Writer

With this year's allotment of a common type of work visa already spoken for, some Northern Michigan resort operators are taking different approaches to fill summer jobs that typically have been handled by workers from abroad.

"Once again, many seasonal businesses in Northern Michigan are being impacted by the shortage of H-2B workers," U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee said in a written statement. "Just as I have in previous Congresses, I will continue working to help these businesses address their seasonal labor needs."

Earlier this month, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced that it had received enough petitions for H-2B work visas to reach the cap of 33,000 workers for the April-September 2009 period.

At The Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, hotel president Dan Musser noted that H-2B workers typically have filled about 250 of the 650 jobs in place at the peak of the season.

Visas are issued on a yearly cycle corresponding with the federal government's fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1. Because summer occurs relatively late in this cycle, employers needing seasonal workers at that time often have faced challenges getting paperwork in place before the cap is reached.

A couple of years ago, the law was updated, with half of the yearly visa allotment designated to be used in the second half of the fiscal year.

But last year, Musser said another federal change served to tighten availability. Workers who had been spending part of their time in the United States over the past three years or more previously didn't see their visas counted toward the yearly cap, but that portion of the law has expired.

About 200 of The Grand Hotel's previous summer employees from abroad have been filling positions at certified properties elsewhere in the United States during Mackinac Island's off-season, and should be able to return this year by way of visa extensions.

To fill other vacancies, Musser said the hotel will expand its efforts to recruit college and university students and use alternative visa types to enlist employees from abroad when possible.

For example, he expects that some workers from Jamaica can use a cultural visa — meant to help promote sharing of cultures internationally for their Mackinac Island stay this year. To fulfill the visa's requirements, these workers will take part in hotel programs showcasing Jamaican foods, dance, music and folklore.

Musser noted that workers using the H-2B visa have helped the hotel cover jobs — trained waiter positions, for example — that can be tough to fill stateside.

"We strongly feel that these foreign nationals are not stealing American jobs," he said.

The island's relatively isolated location and limited availability of family housing contribute to the challenges in recruiting workers domestically, Musser said. In years past, the hotel tried running buses for workers from the Detroit area, but Musser said this proved to be a tough sell to prospective employees.

"We certainly have college students, but again their season is much shorter than ours," Musser added.

While the H-2B limitations may keep some workers who've become familiar with the hotel from returning, Musser said there will be increased use of trainers to help new employees get acclimated.

For several years, Boyne USA Resorts also has relied on H-2B workers to supplement its staff seasonally at Boyne Mountain, Boyne Highlands and The Inn at Bay Harbor — A Renaissance Golf Resort.

“In 2008, approximately one half of the relatively small number of Boyne team members hired from abroad were on a H-2B visa,” said Amanda Haworth, human resources manager for Boyne’s Michigan operations.

Jamaicans using H-2Bs made up about 7 percent of Boyne’s 1,400-member summer workforce last year.

But, “due to early caps on visas, no promising legislative relief in sight combined with the current state of the economy and more local applicants applying, it was decided to not file for any H-2B visa workers this year,” Haworth said.

She added that “resort managers may feel the impact from not bringing any H-2B workers on board this summer season, but are hopeful the open positions are filled as a result of increased resources devoted to recruiting efforts and a larger labor force available in the local community.”

Landscaping is another field where workers from abroad fill some positions locally. In a typical year, Gow Litzenburger, owner of Litzenburger Landscape in Harbor Springs, said he supplements about 20 local employees with a dozen or so hired internationally with H-2Bs.

“At least in our line of work these folks are all farmers,” he said. “They know how to handle plants and things right from the get-go. It works well in our industry.”

While the exhaustion of this year’s H-2B supply could prove challenging, Litzenburger is hopeful that he can line up the workers he needs from abroad by way of visa extensions.

Despite the area’s high unemployment, he noted that those affected by it are “typically not people that are industry specific.”

“Much of our work with the unloading of trucks (involves) a lot of nights and weekends trying to get things ready,” he said. “Very few people want to work the late evenings and weekends.”

Stupak has proposed legislation that would permanently stop returning workers’ exemption from being counted toward visa caps. Although the congressman said this has seen broad bipartisan support, “it has become caught up in the larger debate over immigration reform. Northern Michigan’s seasonal businesses are unlikely to see needed reform to the H-2B program until Congress addresses comprehensive immigration reform.”

### **About the visa**

According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the H-2B work visa allows U.S. employers in industries with peak load, seasonal or intermittent needs to supplement their existing labor force with temporary workers.

The H-2B visa category also allows U.S. employers to augment their existing labor force when needed because of a one-time occurrence requiring a temporary increase in workers. Typically, H-2B workers fill labor needs in occupational areas such as construction, health care, landscaping, lumber, manufacturing, food service/processing and resort/hospitality services.

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