

## Mackinac Island braces for fewer workers this summer

### Visa exemption expires; businesses feel the pinch

BY TINA LAM • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • MARCH 29, 2008

MACKINAC ISLAND -- It's 80 degrees in Kingston, Jamaica. On Mackinac Island, winter lingers on frigid, snowy streets. Even so, Nadine Wright is sad that she won't be able to leave her home in tropical Kingston in a few weeks for her usual summer job on the island.

For the last seven years, Wright, 29, has worked at the Chippewa Hotel on an H2B visa, part of a guest worker program the United States started in the 1940s.

This year, like hundreds of other foreigners who wait tables, check in guests, clean bathrooms and handle horses on the island, she won't be back.

They've all been caught up in the fight in Congress over immigration. Last fall, lawmakers let lapse an exemption that allowed some past visa holders to return to their old employers each year.

"It's going to have a major effect on all of us," said Wright, speaking this week by phone from Jamaica. "It helps us support our families."

Wright -- promoted last year to front office manager at the hotel -- has worked from late April to November each year on Mackinac Island, earning nearly double what she can at home.

Last fall, Congress cut the H2B program nearly in half, leaving workers like Wright on the outside.

The number of H2B visas has been capped at 66,000 a year since 1990. Visa requests from employers have mushroomed since 2002.

Congress allowed returning workers to be exempt from the cap starting in 2004, and more than 120,000 H2B visas were granted last year. But the exemption expired in September, and Congress refused to renew it. Among many others, the change has hurt crabmeat processors in Maryland, ski resorts in Colorado, circuses in California, hotels on Cape Cod and landscapers in Ohio.

In Michigan, landscape firms and summer resorts are scrambling to find workers.

"We will weather the storm, but it's very, very difficult to make it work," said Dan Musser, whose family owns Mackinac's iconic Grand Hotel.



MANDI WRIGHT/DFP

Mary McGuire Slevin, left, director of Mackinac Island's tourism bureau, and Anneke Myers, who hires staff for several businesses on the island, say they are concerned for businesses that depend on foreign workers to fill summer job openings.



MANDI WRIGHT/DFP

The Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island -- closed up for winter -- likely will be affected by the lack of seasonal workers. "We're taking it one summer at a time," said Dan Musser, whose family owns the iconic hotel.

The hotel hires about 650 people each year, about 375 of them on H2B visas. Some foreigners have worked there for decades. None of those past workers can return this year.

"It's potentially devastating to all of us seasonal business owners," Musser said.

He said he hopes to fill out his roster with workers by using two other types of visas and with H2B workers he is borrowing from other hotels in Arizona, California and Colorado who managed to get them under the cap last winter.

"The staff that guests have gotten to know over the years are not going to be there," he said. "We pride ourselves on service, and this will be a challenge."

### **Some critical of visas**

But not everyone is sympathetic.

"There's no reason to have H2B visas at all," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington think tank that supports tighter controls on immigration.

"It's based on the premise that there are jobs Americans won't do. It's absurd," he said. "Employers need to increase wages, change benefits or come up with new ways of recruiting."

Labor unions agree.

The Hispanic caucus in Congress blocked efforts to allow past H2B workers to return this year because they say comprehensive immigration reform is needed, not piecemeal fixes.

"H2B is a casualty in a bigger war called immigration," said U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, a Menominee Democrat who has tried to bring back the returning worker exemption.

Stupak said he had strong bipartisan support a few weeks ago for an immigration measure that included renewing the returning worker provision, but Republicans stalled it because presidential candidate John McCain didn't want to vote on it in an election year.

So, why are resort hotels short of U.S. workers when Michigan has an unemployment rate of 7.2%?

Employers across the island cite the same issues: few unemployed people want to relocate to the island for a job that lasts only half a year; there's little housing, especially for families; college and high school students don't want a summer job scrubbing toilets and prefer internships.

"We need a workforce that can arrive early and stay late," said Mary McGuire Slevin, director of the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau.

In the past, the season lasted only June through August, so resorts hired students and teachers.

Now, the island attracts visitors for twice as many months.

Students are not available in the shoulder months, but H2B workers are. Since they leave families behind, they don't mind the dorm-style housing hotels provide.

Resorts do hire students in peak months, but the H2B workers are core staff that open up the hotels in early spring and help close them after Halloween.

"They're a stable, reliable workforce," said Anneke Myers, who hires staff for the Village Inn, Pontiac Lodge and Balsam Shops on the island.

## **More than just Mackinac**

The problem isn't limited to Mackinac Island. Employers with seasonal jobs all over Michigan use H2B workers.

Carmen Carla has hired five to 13 workers from Mexico each year since 2002 for Decra-scape, a landscape firm in Sterling Heights. This year, none can come.

"For people who hire legal workers and follow the rules, we don't think we should get our hands slapped," she said.

The firm pays minimum wage with incentive bonuses for longevity. Local workers tend to quit after a few days installing retaining walls and brick pavers, she said.

"It's very hard work, and they don't feel the pay fits the job," she said.

Boyne USA has hired Austrians on H2B visas for 30 years at its two Michigan resorts as ski instructors, said Gretchen Crum, personnel director, adding, "It's part of our brand."

This winter, none of the Austrians were allowed back. That made it harder on the staff. Some instructors didn't have a day off all season, she said.

No one knows what the future holds.

"We're taking it one summer at a time," said the Grand Hotel's Musser.

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