

The employer

By Adam Jadhav

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Stan Nowack had seen it coming. He knew other companies in the landscaping business were hiring temporary workers from Latin America. But he resisted.

Nowack, the CEO of Maryland Heights-based Green Turf Grounds Beautification Co., didn't like the idea of using foreign workers. There's always been a stigma, he says.

Still, Nowack needs people to dig ditches and holes. It's grueling work in hot sun for about nine months out of the year. He runs criminal background checks, and his employees are drug tested. And workers have to be able to drive to a job site.

Given those stipulations, Nowack says he just can't find steady American workers to do the job. Sometimes somebody will apply and then bail after a few days. Or even sooner, when Nowack's company sets up a urine screening.

So Nowack turned to the government's H-2B visa program, which brings in a limited number of foreign workers, many from Mexico, for seasonal jobs that employers can't fill.

He hires six to eight workers, finds them furnished apartments and pays them about \$10 an hour and sometimes more depending on experience and prevailing wages.

The program is officially capped at just 66,000 temporary workers nationally each year, though some special exemptions have expanded the number of visas to well beyond 100,000.

Nowack praises his workers as hardworking, dutiful and happy for the work. He figures his industry and others could easily accept even more.

But Congress has let exemptions for the program lapse, meaning the number of H-2B workers will shrink this year, unless something changes. Nowack blames political pressure and stigma over foreign workers — even legal ones. He now fears not having enough people to expand his business or justify needed purchases — \$100,000 for two new vans and a new tractor.

So what should be done? For a start, lock down the borders and increase employment regulation, he says. Cut off the stream of illegal immigrants.

But at the same time, help U.S. businesses by expanding the H-2B program. His company needs it, he says. So do others.

"I'd prefer to hire Americans," he says, "But the reality is that I need those foreign workers."