

The Grooms

## Abruptly Bucked Onto a Tougher Course

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For evidence of Oliver and Rachel Kennedy's dependence on foreign workers visit their [Brookeville](#) horse farm. There they house more than a dozen horses that for the past few years had been cared for by four grooms from [Mexico](#), [Peru](#) and [Bolivia](#). They knew the horses, brushing their manes in the mornings, running the show horses and cleaning their stables.

The routine was shattered this year, said Oliver, when horse men and women in the Northeast and their lawyers overlooked changes to the visa program that they use, causing nearly all the foreign grooms in [Maryland](#) and surrounding states to be booted from the H-2B program, which allows foreign workers into the United States on temporary stints. A process that had let the horse farms collectively apply for grooms through a regional association ended.

"It really put a massive cramp in our style," Oliver said from his farm, where he and his wife have taken up the slack and hire temporary workers when they can.

Until now, the program worked well. The laborers arrived by summer's end, usually earning \$600 a week while working 10-hour days. Along with the Kennedys, who have been in the horse business for decades, the grooms travel to horse shows, preparing the animals for their grand strolls.

But this year, as preparations for the big horse shows begin, the Kennedys are making do without their grooms. "There is no consistency with our horses," said Oliver, who runs, judges and announces horse shows, including the Capital Challenge Horse Show in [Prince George's County](#).



Oliver Kennedy with his horse Smoke Screen at his Brookeville farm. (By Michael Williamson -- The Washington Post)

For shows, such as the one in [Vermont](#) this month, he has hired two local teenage girls on summer break to ready the animals. The teenagers are glad to work the shows but are not interested in the daily grind of clearing manure from horse stalls.

"We've gotten away from playing in the dirt," said Pam Saul, a member of the Maryland Horse Council and part of the family that operates Rolling Acres horse farm, a few miles from the Kennedys.

Some of the foreign grooms have stayed illegally in Maryland on expired visas, reluctant to return to their home countries where employment can be scarce and pay is substantially lower than in the United States.

"It is a mess in our industry," Oliver said. "If you can find someone who is legal . . . they are getting paid through the nose."

He said he needs the foreign workers but is wary of reapplying for the H-2B program. Lawyer's fees for this year's failed attempt cost him \$3,500.

"It used to be easy," he said. "Now, it's not easy at all."