

Need for workers goes beyond waiters, gardeners

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The circus is not coming to town -- no clowns, no acrobats, no jugglers.

The Circus Chimera, a one-ring traveling show based in south Texas, usually performs in nearly 100 communities a year, from California to Washington state, from cities such as Austin and Santa Fe to smaller places such as Killeen, Texas, where the circus only travels every other year.

Jim Judkins, who started as a carnny cook and has owned the circus for 10 years, canceled his season after he couldn't line up any of the 100 workers from Mexico who each year pack up the show, hoist the tents and run the backstage operations.

Judkins said a lot of his shows are sponsored by local civic groups. Without the workers with H-2B visas granted to temporary nonagricultural workers, he said, it wasn't worth the risk.

"If they go out and rent a place and do their advertising and I don't show up, it will kill my reputation," he said. "It's better to close up and take a year off until they get the problem solved."

Judkins is not alone.

Christian Vaccari, who owns Leevac Industries, a shipbuilding firm headquartered in Jennings, La., doesn't need his H-2B workers in the summer -- he needs them now.

"Who would have ever thought I would wake up one morning and find the government had nixed a third of my workers?" Vaccari said, referring to 80 men from Mexico that have come back to work each year. "We spent all the time and energy to do the right thing, to bring in guys with visas and train them and house them. They were ready to show back up in February, and we found out on Jan. 2 that was not the case."

In Tucson, Ariz., the luxurious five-diamond Loews Ventana Canyon Resort is a world away from the sawdust of the traveling circus and the welding torches of a shipyard. But managing director Brian Johnson shares the same problem of getting foreign nationals as workers under the H-2B program.

"The first time we used anyone from H-2B was in 2006. We brought in 20 people. In 2007, we brought in 42 people in five different job categories. We cannot find people to do these jobs," Johnson said.

"We pay above the minimum wage, we give benefits commensurate with the industry," he said. "Without the H-2B people, I would be dead in the water."

Johnson said he needs stewards, spa attendants, housekeepers, workers in the laundry, and people in the kitchen to do basic chores such as peeling carrots.

His needs are smaller than those at other Arizona resorts, he said.

"The 40 people I use are small compared to other resorts in Phoenix and Scottsdale ... they use more than 200," Johnson said. "In the next two years, they plan to add 6,000 more room-nights."

In Lyons, Colo., Beth Vasquez has run the O and A Stone Co. for eight years.

Forty workers from Mexico typically have come on H-2B visas each year to quarry sandstone that is shipped to garden centers and landscapers across the country. "We use the same guys year after year. They are like a family," Vasquez said. "They start as quarry laborers and advance to machine operators."

Trainees make \$11.32 an hour, and experienced workers can get \$20 an hour. A lot of the work is loading heavy stones onto pallets.

"Each piece is stacked by hand," Vasquez said. "It's long hours, in intense heat. And the quarries have no shade."

This year, she said, it appears the H-2B workers won't be able to come back.

"It's going to be pretty disastrous for my company," she said. "I don't know if we could handle a hit like losing our workforce. We advertised in the local paper for a quarry laborer ... We never got one."

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