

## Why Filling Summer Jobs Is Tougher and Tougher

By JUNE KRONHOLZ

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If the lifeguard at the local pool has a Serbian or Russian accent this summer, credit the strong economy, the weak dollar and the cutthroat college-admissions process.

If the pool has trouble finding a lifeguard next summer, blame Congress.

Where would summer be without foreigners to do the wide range of jobs that American students and other seasonal workers once filled -- waiting tables in the Hamptons, selling souvenirs in Yosemite, mowing lawns and guarding swimming pools?

But even as the U.S. economy becomes increasingly reliant on foreign workers, employers are having to look further afield to find them. And the collapse of the Senate immigration bill last month means that pool operators and other summer employers may face more problems next year.

Among the casualties when the bill collapsed was the expansion of a visa program called H-2B, which allows employers to recruit 66,000 foreigners a year to fill jobs for up to six months. The bill would have lifted the cap to 100,000 and would also have made permanent an exemption that now allows in thousands more temporary workers but is set to expire on Sept. 30.



Sladjana Savic, left, and Sanala Ivosevic, recent graduates of a Serbian cosmetology school, work at a Washington-area country club on H-2B visas.

H-2B has become so popular among resort operators, race tracks, casinos, landscapers and others that this summer's supply of visas ran out in March. Democratic Sen. Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, where the seafood industry depends on Mexican H-2B workers to pick the meat from Chesapeake Bay crabs for canning, has vowed to attach an expansion of the program to other legislation.

But in the meantime, the story of how the U.S. came to rely so heavily on foreigners to staff its swimming pools and other seasonal venues says a lot about the changing nature of the U.S. labor force. Stephen Lavery, president of Virginia-based High Sierra Pools Inc., says that he hired neighborhood kids as lifeguards when he began his pool-management company 18 years ago, but that the labor source soon began to dry up. College students began taking internships that would buff their post-graduation résumés, or sought jobs they could continue during the school year. High-school students signed up for summer courses or exotic travel to build up their college applications.

There were other factors as well: The academic year began to start before Labor Day, the skin-cancer alarm was sounded, and low lifeguard pay became unattractive in a high-employment economy.

"To Americans, lifeguards aren't cool," says Amy Kroloff of Century Pools Management Inc., which manages 600 pools on the East Coast and applied for 500 H-2B visas this year.

At the same time, Ms. Kroloff says, the number of public pools grew -- no one knows how many there are -- as more apartment buildings, housing developments and hotels added them as an attraction. Most localities require the pools to have lifeguards instead of allowing patrons to swim at their own risk.

To find workers, Mr. Lavery says he "started to beg," even buying newspaper ads in high-unemployment areas in the Midwest and on Indian reservations. The response: "Zero," he says. He adds that he has had no better luck recruiting among swim teams or at job fairs. One job fair this spring drew 800 people but resulted in just three hires.

Mr. Lavery, whose company provides lifeguards and maintenance to 250 Washington-area pools, says his first H-2B hires a dozen years ago were Germans. But the dollar has weakened against the euro and Western European students have flocked to European Union countries where they don't need visas and can earn more money.

That has forced pool operators to recruit further east each year. This year for the first time, Mr. Lavery has workers from Kazakhstan and Russia, in addition to such mainstay H-2B suppliers as Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. "I've heard there's options in Thailand," he says.

Of his 500 temporary workers this summer, he says that half are foreigners but that they provide "the bulk" of the labor because most work 60 hours a week or more to collect overtime.

The government hands out H-2B visas on a first-come, first-served basis. But employers must have their applications approved by the departments of labor, state and homeland security after proving they can't hire Americans, and the workers have to show binding ties in their home countries to prove they will eventually return home.

"It's a lot of hoops to jump through, but it's that or close," says Jack Brooks, who runs a Maryland crab-processing company. Of 135 seasonal workers at his plant, about 75 are typically H-2Bs, he says, and last summer, they helped the plant clean 59,000 bushels of crabs.

Four years ago, the Grand Hotel on Michigan's Mackinac Island opened three months early so it could get in line for the 350 foreign workers it needs, says the hotel's president, Dan Musser. "We ran at a loss," he adds.

Soon after, Congress divided the visas in half so that winter- and summer-season employers would have 33,000 each. It also agreed to temporarily exempt from the cap anyone who previously had an H-2B. Temporary workers using the exemption now outnumber those on a new H-2B, but the exemption will expire in September -- just as the ski season begins gearing up. Mr. Musser says 75% of his H-2B workers this summer are returnees, and Mr. Lavery says his 50 returning H-2Bs are his team leaders because of their experience.

On a recent bright Saturday, Patricia Fajtova, a 21-year-old Slovak marketing student, explained how she came to be sitting guard at an apartment-house pool in Washington using a temporary cultural-exchange visa: "I typed 'work in the USA' into the Google," and up popped the Sierra Pools Web site, she said.

A few miles away, Sanala Ivosevic and Sladjana Savic, both 24 and recent graduates of a cosmetology school in Serbia, were on duty at a country club. A friend had introduced them to a Sierra Pools recruiter in Belgrade who helped them get H-2Bs.

All three women said they opted for jobs in the U.S. after concluding that careers and marriage will soon limit their opportunities to visit. "We have more chance to see Europe later," said Ms. Ivosevic.

They say they put in at least 60 hours a week and earn about \$8 an hour plus overtime. They rent an apartment and a bicycle from Sierra Pools, and paid their own airfare. Sierra provided lifeguard training.

Practicing English is an attraction of the job. "We learn it in school for years, but we don't speak," said Ms. Savic. Another draw: the prospect of traveling after their pools close and before their visas expire. On her three days off so far, Ms. Fajtova has seen only the White House, a shopping mall and a library, where she took a pool operator's test.

The women expect to finish the summer with a few thousand dollars. Then, said Ms. Ivosevic and Ms. Savic, in perfect unison, "We will spend it."

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