

Foreign aid

The value of the dollar has fallen, making the Shore a less lucrative place for some foreign workers, but the tourism industry still has found a steady supply of seasonal workers from Eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria.

BY [MICHAEL L. DIAMOND](#) • BUSINESS WRITER • JULY 23, 2008

Back home in Sofia, Bulgaria, Stefan Stefanov has a computer graphics job, designing three-dimensional models of buildings, so he might have seemed underemployed working as a cashier last week at Murphy's Market in Beach Haven.

But he said he took the job because it gave him a chance to see America, improve his English, and, perhaps, one other reason.

Even if he stayed at his computer graphics job this summer, "the pay would be less than what I get here," said Stefanov, 22.

Hundreds of foreign students have flocked to the Shore this summer in an annual ritual that allows them to visit America and supplies their employers with labor through September.

The migration these days is taking on a different flavor. The value of the U.S. dollar is so weak that recruiters say they are hard-pressed to find students from Western Europe, and instead are relying more on students from Eastern Europe, where it still makes financial sense for students to work in the United States.

However, even the incentive for them appears to be waning. In Bulgaria, for example, "we used to have students lining up to come to our program," said Casey Slamin, director of the work and travel program at InterExchange, an employment agency in New York. "Now, we're finding them."

A foreign student made the news tragically last week, when Stanislav Nikolaev Dragnev, 21, of Plevin, Bulgaria, was hit in the head by a roller coaster car at Casino Pier in Seaside Heights and died.

The precise number of foreign students working at the Shore isn't clear. InterExchange, one of several employment agencies that recruit international students, has placed more than 1,500 students in New Jersey this summer, Slamin said.

Most of the students on the program have a J-1 visa, which allows them to work and travel in America for a short time before heading home. Through June, the U.S. government had issued more than 287,000 J-1 visas, according to the U.S. State Department.

Mariya Sokolova, 24, of Varna, Bulgaria, is spending her third summer at the Shore. She works 35 to 40 hours a week cleaning rooms at the Coral Seas Motel in Beach Haven. She works another 30 to 35 hours at the Crust & Crumb Bakery, also in Beach Haven.

She lives in free housing provided by Coral Seas. She gets around town on a bicycle, also provided by Coral Seas. But there isn't much time for sightseeing, given her work schedule, she said.

A student at the University of Economics in Varna, Sokolova hopes to land a job in the banking industry, where English is a prized skill. Will the summer experience help her career?

"For my English, yes," Sokolova said, taking a break from cleaning a motel room. "But not this kind of work."

Patrick Kelly, the owner of Coral Seas Motel, began hiring foreign students about 20 years ago, hoping their longer summer vacations could help him solve a perennial problem: American high school and college students return to school at the end of August, before the tourism season ends. This year, eight of his 20 employees are from overseas, he said.



Other employers caught on and embrace the students, many of whom string together more than one job and work upwards of 70 hours a week — all for not much more than minimum wage.

The practice has sparked criticism from labor advocates, who say the employers are taking jobs from Americans. But employers say that's not the case.

"You can get a job, no problem," Mary Jo Martin, manager of Murphy's Market, said last week. "I hired two (Americans) today. We don't turn anybody away."

Martin said some students use the program as a way to visit the United States. Others use it to make money that they send to their families.

But the decision of foreign students to come to America isn't as clear cut as it once was because of the falling value of the U.S. dollar. The dollar on Tuesday, for example, was worth about 0.63 Euros, down 20 percent from two years ago.

The result: Foreign workers paid in U.S. dollars lose money simply by returning home and converting their paycheck into their native currency. It helps explain why students from Ireland, once a common summertime sight at the Shore, have become rare, employers said.

Not so with Bulgaria, one of the poorest countries in the European Union. The country floundered after the Cold War ended in the 1990s, in part because of United Nations sanctions against trading partners Yugoslavia and Iraq in the 1990s, according to the U.S. State Department.

Bulgaria's economy, however, is rebounding. It grew by 6.1 percent in 2006, and its unemployment rate dropped to 6.6 percent in 2007 from 9.6 percent in 2006, according to State Department figures.

"A dollar would still look like quite a bit to a Bulgarian worker," said Edwin Dolan, an economics professor based in Washington state who has taught extensively in Eastern Europe.

For how long? The U.S. dollar has fallen by 20 percent against the Bulgarian lev during the past two years, and the Bulgarian contingent at the Shore has noticed.

Pavlina Mladenova, 24, a law student from Sofia, Bulgaria, is spending her third summer in Beach Haven, working at the Coral Seas Motel and Tiki Taco, a Mexican restaurant. The trip has allowed her to improve her English and earn money. And it is paying off, for now.

"It's still OK, but maybe not next year," Mladenova said.

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