

NEW YORK POST

24 HOURS A DAY
Thursday, February 14, 2008

FIXING TEMPS' VISAS

By DALE McFEATTERS

Lost in the noisy controversy over illegal immigration is the fact that there are foreigners we want to come to this country; indeed, we invite them here.

Included in this category are the mostly young workers who come here for seasonal work in the hotels and restaurants of summer resorts -- 5,000 to 6,000 on Cape Cod alone, as counselors in summer camps and, as the Associated Press reports, as ski instructors, an area of particular shortage. Some do considerably less glamorous work like seafood process and landscaping, work that otherwise might be done by illegals.

These are temporary workers, entering the United States under what are called H-2B visas. They make their money and go home, one hopes with good feelings about this country.

The number of visas is capped at 33,000 every six months, a total of 66,000 a year. However, the program was so popular with employers that Congress raised the cap, basically by exempting returning workers. Thus, the government was able to grant 71,000 H-2B visas for the first six months of fiscal 2007.

But in the fight over the broader immigration issue Congress never got around to extending the exemption for returning workers and the cap relapsed to the old level of 33,000 for six months.

Thus, ski resorts are short of instructors and seaside resorts are beginning to get nervous about next summer. And there is a tight time frame. Employers can't apply for the visas until 120 days before the seasonal employee is to start work.

Some advocacy groups want to use employer desperation over the visas as a lever to enact a broader immigration reform. But a consensus on reform is a long way off, and a peripheral issue like the H-2B visas isn't going to speed that consensus. Many lawmakers are loath to touch immigration at all in an election year, but they should be able to make this one small fix without incurring any fatal political damage.

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