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## **Will Businesses Scramble For Seasonal Workers?**

By: Susan J. Greenberg

**Still feeling the sting from the lack of visas available for foreign seasonal workers, East End businesses are seeking alternative methods to adequately staff their operations for this upcoming tourist season.**

There is a shortage of available workers this season, said Paul Monte, proprietor of the Montauk seaside resort Gurney's Inn, due to the failure of Congress to renew legislation that has, for the past three years, provided for just enough workers to facilitate the needs across the country for a variety of businesses. Everything from ski resorts in the winter, to beach resorts and landscaping companies in the summer, have relied upon the influx of H-2B visa workers, who are allowed to stay in the country for up to 10 months.

"Nothing is happening," said Monte.

Last year, because of an exemption bill that was in place, 135,000 workers were allowed in the country to work, in addition to those who were returning from the three previous years, noted Monte. The exemption bill, he said, was crafted in 2005 and was extended through September of 2007. However, because Congress has failed to renew this bill, there is a maximum of 66,000 workers allowable for the year for the entire country. Most of these visas already were granted as of January 2, filled by ski resorts and other winter establishments.

Although Monte, who has become the de facto point person for the area, has been working with US Congressman Tim Bishop (D-Coram) on remediating the problem, no progress has been made. In February, Bishop signed a letter, along with 90 other members of Congress, asking President George W. Bush for an immediate extension of the worker program, but to no avail. The Bush administration, said Bishop, responded to the letter by stating that they "would not take action to help small business owners" at this point.

"Unfortunately, the president continues to ignore the plight of small businesses across the country, while opposing interest groups in Congress are impeding new legislation, which I co-sponsored, to remedy the H-2B visa shortage," said Bishop. "As the clock ticks, I have been working with local businesses to develop contingency plans to cover the impending shortfall of workers this summer."

Monte said that he has resorted to utilizing the J-1 visa population, made up of students from other countries who are allowed to stay only for four months. In addition, he is using students from various hotel management internship programs in other countries, who also can stay only for four months. This, he said, will be problematic during the spring and fall months, when tourism is still in high swing.

"We have gone ahead in bringing in students on J-1 visas from the Philippines and also from Europe on work travel programs," said Monte.

In addition, Monte said that he is hoping to piggyback on those H-2B visa workers who are already in the country and who are coming off of work stints at winter resorts. "We are also working with some H-2B employers in Florida and will hopefully be able to get some extensions for the summer," he noted.

This season he is hoping to bring in between 35 and 40 workers, where under the traditional H-2B program he has hired between 60 and 90. "The students will cover our peak season, but come the end of the summer we will be scrambling," Monte said.

Andrew Lynch, vice president of the Hampton Jitney bus line, said that in addition to using J-1 visa students, he is pushing to recruit more local workers. "The H-2B workers used to come in March for us, which was very helpful as the season picked up," said Lynch. "Now we are increasing our hiring efforts and using more [people from] the J-1 visa program than before. We are looking to try to get some of them in earlier as a main way to make up the difference."