

Local company employs Mexican workers through guest worker program

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CLEVELAND -- If you see seasonal workers doing landscaping and other seasonal jobs in northeast Ohio, don't assume they are among the estimated 12 million Mexicans in this country illegally.

"Since 2000, we have hired 26 Mexican workers for seasonal employment under the federal H2B Guest Worker Program," says Mary Wheeler of Wheeler Landscaping in Auburn Township.

The workers have passports, temporary worker visas and even Ohio driver's licenses. They come here in March, before student seasonal workers are available for summer jobs, and stay and work through November.

They are paid more than the U.S. minimum wage and are able to send money home to support their families.

"I earn in nine months here what it would take me two years to earn back home", said Jose Pedroza, who is bi-lingual and supervises the Mexican work crews. He sends money home to his wife and daughter.

His friend Jesus Coria is supporting a wife, five children and his father in Mexico.

Jose said they appreciate the program that allows them to come to the United States, work for a specified time, then return home.

"It's better because this way you don't have to be hiding out", Jose said of his legal status compared to the illegal immigrants.

Mary Wheeler, owner of the landscape design and maintenance company, said even though the guest worker program means extra government paperwork to hire the guest workers, it is actually profitable.

"Before, when we hired seasonal workers locally, we would have to hire 70 or more employees to cover 26 positions over the nine months. Now these guest workers come for the nine months, work and return home. They are paying all the same taxes Americans pay. It's a win-win situation".

Mary Wheeler is concerned that the guest worker program could be modified or even eliminated in the sweeping immigration reform currently being debated in the U. S. Senate.

One of several guest worker programs, H2B currently issues temporary work visas to 66,000 workers a year.

Jose says he would like to someday bring his wife and daughter with him for the months he works in northeast Ohio and perhaps someday move here. His friend Jesus says he is here only for the seasonal work. Mexico will always be his home.