

Problems with immigration visas plague circus performers in Hugo

By Associated Press

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HUGO -- Circus owners say restrictive U.S. immigration laws have left them without enough workers.

Congress has failed to approve a provision that allows foreign workers who were in the country on H-2B visas last year to return, and this has left some circuses short of people to sell tickets, build rides and put up the big top.

"Most Americans don't want to give up living in one place, having a house, to travel nine months a year," said Jim Judkins, who has worked in the circus industry for the past 32 years. "Not everybody wants to drop out of college and run away to the circus like I did."

He said the worker shortage will prevent his Circus Chimera from going on the road this season. His is one of four circuses that winter in Hugo in southeastern Oklahoma.

H-2B visas are given to seasonal workers who must pass a series of background checks and reviews.

Workers with H-2B visas are allowed to stay in the country for 10 months and must pay all taxes. Congress has set a limit on the number of new visas that can be issued in a fiscal year.

Under federal law, 66,000 visas applicants are issued during the fiscal year. That number has already been met. In past years, Congress has passed legislation that allows existing workers in good standing to return on H-2B visas, but amid the debate for immigration reform, that provision has stalled.

"We just want people to write their congressmen about this," said Kristin Parra, with Carson and Barnes Circus. "We have lobbyists up there and they tell us that basically that's the only thing that's going to help. Immigration is such a hot topic, nobody really wants to make a move on it. It's just kind of being put into the mix of problems."

Parra said Carson and Barnes has visas for 30 workers that begin on April 1, weeks after the circus has opened its season.

"We really need them to be here to help repair equipment to get ready to go out on the road," Parra said. "We've been bringing them here legally for years. We're hoping that the exemption will be in place, but our philosophy is that the show must go on. We're geared up to go out. But if we don't have enough workers by March, we may have to downsize that."

Workers who help build and tear down the circus tents are in the country legally and pay taxes like the rest of American workers, said Jim Royal, general manager of the Kelly Miller Circus.

Royal estimates about 22 of his workers are in the country on H-2B visas. Some have been coming to work for the circus for more than a decade.

Without those workers, it will be hard to efficiently move from town to town when the circus' season opens March 15. "It's going to make the tour more difficult for us," Royal said.

"They knew what they were doing," he said of the workers. "Mexico is awash with circuses large and small. We have workers who understand how to work with tents. These workers are a real asset for us. They are knowledgeable and willing to be out in all sorts of weather for 32 to 34 weeks at a time."