

## Newport may be scrambling for summer help

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Carlos Avila Sandoval, consul General of Guatemala for New England, speaks in Newport.

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Carlos Avila Sandoval, the Guatemalan consul general for New England, said his countrymen come to the United States to escape the grinding poverty and a long legacy of violence and political instability at home.

"If you have no food to put on the table, and 10 or 12 children to feed . . . it's better for you to go to the United States than to go down to the plantations, and cut sugar cane or pick coffee beans until you die," he said. The money that Guatemalan immigrants make in the United States, he said, can provide a vital boost to the economy in their native country.

William Shuey, executive director of the International Institute of Rhode Island, said 2000 census figures indicated there were between 9,000 and 10,000 Guatemalans in the state, and the numbers may have gone up since then.

Avila Sandoval was one of the speakers at a seminar on immigration and employment held yesterday at the Hotel Viking in Newport by the Newport County Chamber of Commerce. He urged greater acceptance of identification cards issued by the consulate. The cards, he said, do not prove that the holder has a legal right to be in the United States, but they do prove that people are who they say they are, and reduce the possibilities of fraud.

Avila Sandoval said the United States is an empire, and people from around the world have always been drawn to empires, whether it's the United States today or Britain, Spain or Rome in the past. "Manifest Destiny . . . this is what you wanted 200 years ago. Now you have it," he said.

His remarks were followed by presentations from a series of immigration experts, who attempted to explain some of the dizzying complexities of U.S. immigration law. Jamie Martel, of Sayer Regan Thayer & Flanagan in Newport, referred to "an alphabet soup of visas" — the H visas, the J-1 visa, the F-1 visa, the L-1, the O-1, the P-1, the Q, the R, the S, the T, the U.

Of particular interest to the Newport hospitality industry is the number of seasonal workers with H-2B visas allowed into the country this year. Congress put a cap of 66,000 on the number of H-2B visas allowed, but an exemption in place since 2004 has allowed seasonal workers who had previously held the visas to return and not count against the limit. But that exemption has expired, and so far Congress has not renewed it.

Keith Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, said he went to Washington, D.C., last week to discuss the issue. He said it appears unlikely Congress will act in time for this summer's tourist season, leaving the hospitality industry in Newport, and around the country, scrambling for alternatives.

Stokes, who estimated that Newport gets 3.5 million visitors each year, said the community has been using “guest workers” since 1794, and emphasized that foreign-born employees do not take jobs away from Rhode Islanders. “We don’t do this [seeking foreign workers] to keep people out of work here,” said Tracy Troiano, human resources director for the Hyatt Regency Newport. “If we could hire locally, we would.”

Avila Sandoval said his job is to help the Guatemalan community in New England, which in turn helps both Guatemala and the United States. “It’s a small world today, and we are all in this together,” he said. “We have to deal with it business-wise, capital-wise, people-wise. . . . ultimately, it works to the advantage of us both.”

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