



Editorials

Politics affects island's need for foreign help

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Rhode Island, which once welcomed waves of French Canadians, Italians, Irish, Cape Verdeans, eastern Europeans and others, is not a friendly place for foreign workers today, the Boston Globe recently noted.

State leaders have floated a variety of harsh measures aimed at undocumented workers and at those housing and hiring them. Rhode Island Gov. Carcieri would bump their children from healthcare rolls and he vowed to exclude them from unemployment compensation after a Mexican worker whose face was slashed by a chainsaw collected \$30,000.

When the spotlight fell on the first 2008 baby, the father was found to be undocumented, with a minor crime record, and was promptly deported — whereupon his partner, a U.S. citizen with three children, said she would need welfare aid, according to the Globe.

The harshness and venom about illegal immigrants obscures America's need for foreign workers, and Block Island is a perfect example.

Businesses here still hope their H-2B visa workers from faraway places will return to work another summer. It's highly unlikely, barring a major shift in public attitudes. The 25-member Hispanic Caucus of Congress, offended by these attitudes and the failure of comprehensive immigration reform last summer, is stonewalling any patchwork.

Actually, the H-2B program, which allows employers to import seasonal workers, is in no danger, but its 66,000 visas are greatly oversubscribed. Employers cannot file applications more than 120 days before they need help, which leaves Northeast resorts with their late-starting season holding the bag.

In 2005, Congress enacted the Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act, which allows the return of veteran workers. That increased H-2B visas from 66,000 to about 130,000 workers and kept businesses humming.

But that act has expired and the Hispanic Caucus has rebuffed efforts to attach it to other bills, despite pressure from the H-2B Workforce Coalition that on one occasion drew 700 people to Washington. Pleas for help have come from the carnival industry, racetracks, a Texas circus, crab processors, an Erie, Pa., shipbuilder, construction firms and ski resorts. But Congress is loath to roll over the solid Hispanic Caucus.

So who will prepare your calamari at The Oar this summer? Who will fill 25 positions at the Manisses, 20 at the National, 20 at Ballard's?

Every islander who wants summer work has it. Few unemployed Rhode Islanders will take offshore seasonal work — island employers know because under H-2B rules they must ask. The foreign students on J-1 visas are pleasant, lively and good-looking, but they tend to be unskilled and inexperienced.

It's not just the Hispanic Caucus that stands in the way. Many believe that America has workers for every job — importing them is like "watering your lawn in the middle of a thunderstorm," says Rep. Tom Tancredo, the Colorado incendiary.

Well, Flint, Mich., has unemployed autoworkers, but can Mr. Tancredo persuade them to flip hamburgers on Block Island?

This is a big nation and one size doesn't fit all. If the flow of foreign workers fails, a sizeable share of the American economy is threatened.