

Refugees a boon to summer businesses

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Yemane Tolli, 32, works in the laundry room at Spring House on Block Island. The high season has begun.

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BLOCK ISLAND — It was a long, difficult journey that brought Martin Tay, 22, from the war-racked African nation of Liberia to the landmark Spring House Hotel on Block Island. Tay, along with his older brother Zawolo, is one of a half-dozen African refugees working this summer at the Spring House.

Tay, who said he has been in the United States for 15 months, and at the Spring House for about one month, is being trained for housekeeping and laundry work, making \$9 an hour. Wearing a crisp polo shirt with the hotel logo on the chest, Tay said he was pleased to be at the Spring House, even if the job would last only through the summer.

"The people are nice; they take good care of me," he said. "They're training me, getting me used to the job. I really like their attitude."

Tay said his father and grandfather, a Liberian government official, were killed in the civil wars that devastated his country. His mother had come to the United States, where she had been granted political asylum, while Tay, his brother and his grandmother fled to refugee camps in Guinea and the Ivory Coast. Finally, he said, his mother was able to bring the three remaining members of the family to Providence about a year ago. Tay said the process took three years. "To be in the United States, it's a dream. ... I'm getting food, I'm working — it's beautiful for me!" Tay said.

Tay got his job at the Spring House through the International Institute of Rhode Island, a nonprofit agency that serves immigrants and refugees in the state. "It's not easy to find a job, especially if you don't have a car," Tay said.

The Spring House, which employs about 60 people during the summer, was desperate for workers. Its usual seasonal employees from Jamaica, who had been allowed into the United States under a temporary visa program, were unable to return this year because of a congressional impasse over immigration.

The Rhode Island Hospitality and Tourism Association estimated that Rhode Island employers, mostly hotels and restaurants in Newport and Block Island, normally use about 600 of the temporary employees, known as H-2B workers after the federal designation for their visas. With those workers unavailable, Rhode Island hotel and restaurant owners have been scrambling to find help for this year's summer tourist season.

"I'm pulling my hair out. I'm looking for anyone and everyone," said Rick Farrick, who owns five B&Bs in Newport, including the Cleveland House and the Admiral Farragut Inn. Some employers stepped up their efforts to hire local workers — the Hospitality and Tourism Association, in partnership with the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, sponsored a job fair in Newport last month that attracted 20 employers and about 200 job seekers. Some have used employment agencies, or turned to other states.

Steve Filippi, owner of Ballard's Inn on Block Island, said plans to bring in workers from the Philippines fell through, and he was unsuccessful in hiring enough local people, leaving him about 15 staff positions short so far this summer. Filippi said staff shortages are forcing him to cut back operating hours at his restaurant through July 1, moving the opening from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and the closing from 10 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Filippi said he hoped to expand the hours in July and August.

The Spring House put a help-wanted ad on Craigslist, the Internet advertising bulletin board. Catherine Kelly, a job developer for the International Institute, saw the ad and contacted David Houseman, general manager for the Spring House. Houseman said the two met in February and toured the hotel.

At the time, Kelly said, she was unaware of the H-2B worker situation. Now she has placed between 15 and 20 refugees, from Liberia, the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and Eritrea, in jobs at hotels around the state, such as the Hyatt Regency in Newport. Refugees, she pointed out, are authorized to work in the United States, and have the further advantage of already being here. "Our preference would be to find them full-time employment," she said. "But a lot of refugees are eager to get to work as soon as possible. . . they're proud to be working."

Baha Sadr, director of the refugee resettlement program for the International Institute, said the institute works with about 130 new refugees a year. The Institute is a partner agency with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, a national voluntary agency that has a contract with the U.S. State Department to undertake refugee resettlement.

At the Spring House, Houseman and assistant managing director Barbara Hirsch said things seem to be working out reasonably well, although the varying English skills among the new African workers can make communications slow going. Houseman said he and Spring House owner Frank DiBiase are keeping a close eye on the tourist economy, and if business is good this summer they might hire a few more refugee workers. Workers at the Spring House live on Block Island, in housing owned by the hotel.

"Put it this way, I'm sleeping at night. All winter long, I wasn't sleeping. We had all the eggs in one basket," Houseman said. And that basket was the H-2B program. DiBiase said some of the Jamaican workers the Spring House employed under the H-2B program had been working there for eight years. He said he still gets calls from Jamaicans who want to know when they can come back.

For the moment, it doesn't look as though they'll be here anytime soon.

The H-2B visa program was established by the federal government to allow industries with seasonal needs, from skiing in Colorado to seafood processing in Louisiana, to augment their work forces with temporary employees. In 1991, the number of H-2B workers allowed into the United States was capped at 66,000.

In 2005, Congress passed the Save Our Small and Seasonal Business Act, which allowed foreign nationals who had already worked here under the H-2B program to return without counting against the cap. Last year, more than 120,000 workers came into the country under H-2B visas. But the act expired on Sept. 30, sending the cap back down to 66,000.

So far, efforts to revive the act have failed in Congress. The latest attempt, in the Senate, added an H-2B provision to an appropriations bill. But the provision was struck from the legislation following an objection from Sen. Bernard Sanders, of Vermont. In a statement, Sanders said he opposed expanding the H-2B program because the program is frequently used by employers to drive down the wages and benefits of U.S. workers, while cheating foreign workers out of their earnings.

Last month, the U.S. Department of Labor proposed some changes in the H-2B program. Under the new rules, for example, employers would be prohibited from passing application costs along to foreign workers.

Keith Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, said he can't comment on the rest of the country, but he's seen no evidence that Sanders' allegations apply to the Newport area. "I've never heard of a case that the H-2B program drives down wages in the Newport County market," he said.

Shawn McBurney, senior vice president for governmental affairs at the American Hotel & Lodging Association, and co-chairman of the H-2B Workforce Coalition, said additional opposition in Washington to H-2B measures is being led by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, which is holding out for comprehensive immigration reform. McBurney said the caucus was "holding small business around the country hostage."

At a news conference in April, Hispanic Caucus chairman Rep. Joe Baca, D-Calif., called H-2B bills "nothing more than a Band-Aid being used to cover up a gaping wound."

In Rhode Island, employers and tourism officials said that H-2B problem is not about immigration at all, since the workers do not intend to stay in the United States. They also say that H-2B workers were not taking jobs from Rhode Islanders, because most people are not interested in a job that lasts only four or five months. And college students often need to be back on campus before Labor Day, leaving employers high and dry during one of the busiest weekends of the year.

Farrick, the B&B owner in Newport, said he had three job interviews set up a few weeks ago — one candidate was in jail, one called in sick and one never showed up.

On the other hand, Jody Sullivan, associate director of the Greater Newport Chamber of Commerce, said some employers did hire people through last month's job fair in Newport. She said the Chamber will probably make a summer job fair an annual event and move it from May to April, earlier in the hiring season.

In the meantime, Ocean State hotels and restaurants are finding different ways to cope with losing their H-2B workers this summer.

At The Hotel Viking, in Newport, human resources director Susan O'Donnell said the hotel went to Alabama and hired nine H-2B workers who were already in the country, and agreed to extend their visas. (H-2B workers in the United States can remain as long as three years if they find sponsoring employers.) "It's worked out well. It was a little cold for them at first, but they're acclimating," she said.

O'Donnell said the Viking interviewed some candidates from the Newport job fair, but didn't hire anyone. "Finding that true hospitality worker has been tough," she said.

Lisa Rose, human resources director for the Newport Harbor Hotel and Marina, said the hotel managed to find two H-2B workers who extended their visas, hired five people from the job fair, and also obtained some workers through Goodwill Industries in Providence. She said the hotel also hired some local housekeepers, but they quit two days later.

Farrick, the B&B owner in Newport, said he hired two students from Bulgaria. (Students are allowed to work in the United States under a different visa program, designated the J-1.) Farrick also said three women from Jamaica who were already working at another Newport hotel "showed up at the front door" looking for extra work. Farrick said he planned to use them to fill gaps in his schedule.

At the Spring House on Block Island, the African workers are getting accustomed to their new jobs. "They need to be trained. We're adapting, they're adapting. The main thing is they want to work," said Hirsh, the assistant managing director.

Martin Tay said he'd like to stay at the Spring House even after the summer is over. (General manager Houseman said that won't be possible, since the hotel closes down during the off season.)

Asked if he has any plans to return to Liberia, Tay shook his head. "Not now. My house was burned to ashes. I really want to work, save money and go to school," said Tay, who hopes to be a musician and a pastor. "I really want to serve the Lord."

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