

FAR FROM HOME

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Lowcountry hospitality industry depending on foreign temps to fill jobs few Americans want

While more than 80 percent of Charleston's tourists drive to get here, many of the people who work in its restaurants and hotels need a passport to get to their jobs.

The local hospitality industry has become dependent on a steady stream of workers from Mexico, Eastern Europe and Jamaica. With work visas that let these recruits stay between six and 10 months, the temporary, foreign labor pool helps to fill jobs that hoteliers and restaurateurs say would otherwise go unfilled.

"(Americans) don't want these jobs in many cases, whereas these people are happy to be here, making what money they can and getting a taste of what democracy is like," said Duane Parrish, head of the local hotel/motel association and general manager at the Hampton Inn on Daniel Island.

Parrish held a job fair about two years ago to fill some of the 30 or so housecleaning positions that his hotel had open. When he failed to get a single applicant willing to clean rooms, he turned to Easy Staffing, a local company that hires out Eastern Europeans. Parrish said about 15 to 20 other Charleston hotels have taken similar steps to keep their rosters full.

Hyacinth Williams, a chef at Kiawah Island Resort, has spent more time in the Lowcountry the past four years than she has in her native Jamaica, where, according to the World Bank Group, the average annual income is around \$3,000. Williams is one of the 75 or so Jamaicans who commute to the island resort every March for an eight-month stint. About half of them return every year.

"It's a wonderful place to work with wonderful people," Williams said. "I can make three times what I would make in Jamaica."

For Williams, the job is an opportunity to provide a better life for her 11-year-old daughter even though it means she spends most of her time away from her.

"My second family is here - right here in this kitchen - so I feel loved," she said.

Although it's clear that Williams is proud of the cooking skills she's learned and her ability to provide for her relatives in Jamaica, she said she has no plans or desire to move to the United States full-time and become a citizen.

Williams made her connection with Kiawah through one of the many staffing firms along the East Coast that help hospitality companies locate foreign workers and clear the federal hurdles of getting them in the country and on a payroll.

After using these staffing firms for a year, Kiawah human resource managers started going down to Jamaica to recruit workers themselves. Theresa Silo, Kiawah's human resource director, said thousands of Jamaicans show up "in their Sunday best" to try to secure one of the 35 or so new jobs she has to fill every year.

It's hard to figure out just how many of the 30,000 or so local hospitality jobs are filled by foreigners, but it's clear that managers at Charleston hotels and restaurants would be scrambling to get dishes cleaned and linens changed if all of the non-U.S. citizens were suddenly sent home.

"The industry as a whole is dependent on foreign labor," said Catherine Sandlin, executive director of the local hotel/motel association.

Foreign workers aren't tracked by the Charleston Chamber of Commerce or the state's employment and tourism agencies, but last year 86,987 H2B visas were given out by the federal government. These are temporary work permits for people with no specific training or skills. The Department of Labor said about 16,500 of these applicants are hired by hospitality companies around the country. While the construction and forestry industries also rely on foreign laborers, only landscaping outfits draw more temporary workers from other countries.

South Carolina had about 3,556 temporary workers from foreign countries last year, according to the federal Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, but that number includes trained employees, such as medical professionals and engineers.

Although tourists aren't complaining, there has always been a strong lobby in America against immigrant and foreign labor. Those voices have gotten louder in the wake of the 9-11 attacks and the recession.

Dawn Teo's feelings on foreign labor were so strong that she and her husband recently founded Rescue American Jobs, a nonprofit lobbying group bent on keeping American borders closed to international job seekers.

Teo, a Mesa, Ariz., resident, bankrolled most of the organization's start-up cost with savings.

"It's about saving America, because we're exporting jobs, we're importing workers and it's depressing wages," she said. "(Hospitality leaders) are lying if they tell you that they can't fill positions with Americans. They're not jumping through hoops to hire U.S. citizens when actual unemployment is well over 10 percent and they're still hiring foreigners."

Local hospitality leaders argue that, in fact, they don't save any money by hiring overseas. Most hotels and restaurants pay the staffing firms about \$9 an hour per employee, a couple of dollars more than U.S. workers may command. On the other hand, the hospitality companies don't have to pay for insurance or benefits to temporary workers.

The companies also have to go through an extensive approval process, in which they must prove to state and federal labor agencies that they couldn't fill the open positions with U.S. citizens. South Carolina hotels and restaurants must post a job notice within their company for 10 days, advertise in a local newspaper for one week, contact every applicant within 14 days and explain their reasoning to state officials if they turn an American down.

"It's a tedious process, and we fine-tooth-comb these applications," said Helene Law, who oversees the foreign labor certification process for the state. "We are very careful about not skipping over U.S. citizens."

Myrtle Beach hotels and restaurants, which also rely heavily on foreign labor, got so strapped a few years ago that they started busing in hundreds of workers from depressed areas hours inland.

Turning to foreign labor was a "last resort" for the Doubletree Inn & Suites in downtown Charleston, which employs about three to nine temporary workers from Europe at any given time.

"We pursued all the avenues that we could, but we were getting no applications. Either that, or we were getting people with tremendous histories of job jumping," said general manager Tripp Hays.

Gary Crossley, area director for the state Employment Security Commission, said he doesn't get a lot of unemployed residents of the state applying for restaurant jobs, partly because they can get better-paying jobs and partly because they just aren't interested.

"There's just something about cleaning rooms or cleaning kitchens that people have an aversion to," Crossley said.

Hoteliers and restaurateurs said they prefer the stability of hiring U.S. citizens, citing fewer legal hoops to jump through and the ability to retain and promote good employees.

However, most managers are more than happy with the work ethic and attention to detail that laborers from less privileged parts of the world bring to the job. And with friends and family an hours-long plane ride away, there's usually no issue in keeping foreign workers motivated and available to work additional shifts.