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## Legal foreign workers' future is in doubt

*Illegal immigration debate in Congress stalls efforts to ease restrictions on guest workers*

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**WASHINGTON** — Foreign workers such as software expert Vikas Chowdhry from India and Roberto Villarauz, a janitor from Mexico, abide by the nation's immigration laws.

They have skills their employers say are necessary to meet industry demands for highly skilled workers or for jobs Americans don't want.



Jamaican immigrant Jennifer Grant, who works on a temporary visa, cleans a room in the Grand Oaks Hotel in Branson, Mo. Thousands of foreign workers at hotels, resorts and small businesses might lose their jobs unless Congress renews a federal law that exempts them from a cap on the number of visas for seasonal workers that expired at the end of September. (AMBER ARNOLD / SPRINGFIELD (MO.) NEWS-LEADER)

Yet, both are among hundreds of thousands of legal foreign workers, including software engineers, hotel employees, seafood [processors](#), landscapers and vegetable pickers, who are in the U.S. temporarily but are caught in the polarizing debate over illegal immigration that casts uncertainty over their livelihood and future.

Legal foreign workers like Chowdhry and Villarauz might not get help until after next year's elections because Congress is deadlocked on any changes to the nation's immigration laws.

Congress defeated legislation this year to overhaul the immigration system, which would have extended and improved seasonal, high-tech and agriculture guest worker programs. About 575,000 legal foreign workers are in the U.S. under these guest worker programs, according to the Department of Homeland [Security](#).

These temporary workers hold U.S. government-issued "H-visas" that proponents argue should be revised by Congress to help legal foreign workers and their employers.

For example, tens of thousands of seasonal workers at hotels, resorts and other [small businesses](#) could lose their jobs unless Congress renews a separate law that allows the government to issue more than the 66,000 H-2B visas it is supposed to be limited to. The exemption expired Sept. 30.

High-tech workers and their employers want improvements in the H-1B program, which has an annual cap of 65,000 visas. For the 2008 fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, the limit would drop to 58,200 unless Congress says otherwise.

Agriculture workers, growers and farmers are pushing to streamline the H-2A visa program by supporting yet another bill that would offer legal status and possible U.S. citizenship for 1.5 million farm workers.

### **Hotel needs workers**

Four members of Roberto Villarauz's family from Veracruz, Mexico, who work at the Grand Oaks Hotel in Branson, Mo., are affected by the H-2B impasse.

"I don't want to go back to Veracruz, but I (might) have to," said Roberto Villarauz, 33, a janitor who makes \$7.75 an hour.

In May, he arrived with his wife, Mayra Hernandez, and cousin, Alonso Villarauz, and Alonso's wife, Cristel Hernandez, all janitors or housekeepers making the same wage. In Mexico, janitors earn \$9 per day, Alonso Villarauz said.

The family would have to return to Mexico on Dec. 15, when their visas expire.

Lee Thomas, general manager of the Grand Oaks Hotel, said 17 of his 51 employees are temporary foreign workers.

"If I don't have enough housekeepers and workers, I can't expand, and I might have to scale back my services," Thomas said. "There is not enough (of a) work force in this area."

Last year, there were 97,279 seasonal H-2B workers, according the Department of Homeland Security. Unless Congress acts, all of them would have to compete for 66,000 H-2B visas that would be allowed next year.

Other foreign workers like Chowdhry say they are frustrated by Congress' unwillingness to improve the H-1B visa program for high-tech workers.