



June 2, 2008

Lifeguard Shortage Blamed On Guest Worker Policies

(WUSA) -- The immigration debate is being felt this summer in some unlikely places -- the pool deck, for instance.

"We simply cannot get Americans to take lifeguarding jobs," said professional swimming pool manager Steve Lavery of Sierra Pools of Arlington.

But the flow of temporary foreign workers has been sharply curtailed by Congress' failure to extend a visa program that many seasonal businesses have come to depend on.

"We're having an H-2B crisis," Lavery warned, referring to the program that has allowed him to bring about 500 overseas workers per season into the US to cover the apartment complex and hotel pools he manages from Baltimore to Richmond.

The number of available visas dropped from approximately 200-thousand last season to only 66-thousand for the summer of 2008.

Many lifeguards hail from eastern European nations like Bulgaria and Ukraine.

At \$9-per-hour, Americans have migrated away from such summer jobs, in part because high schools and colleges often start classes before pools close on Labor Day.

There are pools that may not open this season or will have curtailed hours, Lavery predicts.

Empty lifeguard chairs are only one illustration of a problem that is affecting a variety of industries including seafood packers, landscapers and agriculture.

Written by Scott Broom
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