

Seasonal worker shortage threatens regional tourism Immigration impasse limits visa program

By Jenna Russell, Globe Staff | January 27, 2008



Allegra Carignan of Brattleboro, Vt., got some tips last week from Francisco Vilcher of Los Andes, Chile, during a snowboarding class at Mount Snow, Vt. (Caleb Kenna for the Boston Globe)

In the midst of the snowiest winter in recent memory, Vermont ski resorts are being strained by a shortage of foreign workers who for years have cleaned rooms, taught lessons, and filled other seasonal jobs. The shortfall, caused by cutbacks in the number of work visas issued, is an unexpected consequence of the standoff in Congress over immigration reform.

At Mount Snow, west of Brattleboro, fewer ski instructors has meant fewer classes this winter, and more disappointed customers. At Stowe, managers are still recruiting, trying to fill gaps before the busy February school vacations.

"This is hurting Vermont, and as a Vermonter, it's hurting me," said Thorin Magbie, human resources director at Mount Snow. "It's very frustrating to us to have families calling who want to bring their kids to ski and ride, and to have to tell them there's no room."

Cape Cod, Nantucket, and Martha's Vineyard expect to feel the same pressure when warm weather hits. Hotels, restaurants, retail shops, and landscaping businesses on the Cape and islands rely on an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 workers from Jamaica, Bulgaria, Brazil, Poland, Russia, and other economically depressed countries, who come to the US on temporary H-2B visas to bolster the workforce during the busiest season.

But this year, the seasonal worker program became entangled in the contentious immigration debate, and the number of workers allowed in the country was curtailed, catching many business owners by surprise and leaving them scrambling to fill positions.

"We're all in deep trouble if nothing gets done," said Mark Hogan, owner of the landmark Nantucket breakfast spot the Downyflake, whose veteran crew returns every year from Jamaica. "I don't know what I would do with our business, whether I would close or move tables out because I wouldn't have people to serve them. People don't understand how it will devastate our economy."

In 2005, in response to increasing demand for foreign labor, Congress relaxed the cap of 66,000 foreign workers admitted each year on H-2B visas in legislation that said workers who had held visas in the previous three years could return without being counted as part of the quota.

That allowed some 50,000 more visas to be issued.

But last fall, as proponents sought to renew the exemption for returning workers, Hispanic members of Congress said they would insist on comprehensive reform of immigration laws and oppose all piecemeal legislation, which included the exemption. The renewal stalled and the cap on workers reverted to 66,000.

Supporters of the seasonal worker program say it has little to do with immigration, though it has been swept up in the larger issue.

"This is designed to meet a seasonal need - it isn't about illegal immigration," said US Representative William Delahunt, who represents the Cape and islands and supports the cap expansion.

Delahunt said a bipartisan coalition in Congress has drafted a letter to President Bush asking him to reinstate the exemption, and may also propose adding the measure to the forthcoming economic stimulus package.

"We have reports from all over the country that businesses can't function and will close down unless this program is reauthorized," Delahunt said. "It's not helping an economy that is in serious trouble."

But critics say the foreign workers drive down wages and take jobs from Americans. Steve Kropper, co-chairman of Mass Citizens for Immigration Reform, said the roadblock to finding local labor is the low pay the business owners offer.

"Americans will fill any job for the right wage, and we're all advanced when the people on the bottom of the scale get paid better," he said. "We have our own low-skilled people; let's help them out."

But proponents say Americans get the first shot at the jobs. The government requires that employers advertise positions in the United States before filling them from overseas, and mandates that foreign workers be paid the prevailing wage, said Jane Nichols Bishop, a consultant in West Dennis who assists Cape businesses seeking foreign workers.

"These are seasonal destinations that do not have a workforce for their busy season, because most Americans need year-round jobs," she said. "These workers are not immigrants; they are not illegals."

At Mount Snow and other ski resorts, managers said they were caught off guard by the government's announcement on Oct. 1 last year, that the cap for the first half of the fiscal year had been reached and that no more visas would be processed. Like other resorts, Mount Snow hired some foreigners with other types of visas, such as exchange students, but could not bring back experienced instructors recruited in previous years from Europe, Australia, and South Africa, said Magbie.

"Our guests had the luxury of a diverse staff, and I think we all miss that," he said.

At Stowe Mountain Resort in Vermont, the workforce of 1,000 people, including 250 ski instructors, previously included 30 to 40 foreign workers, most of whom taught ski classes or worked as housekeepers. None of those employees returned this winter, said Julie Frailey, Stowe's director of human resources, and the resort east of Burlington is still trying to beef up its staffing in time for February school vacation.

"It wasn't a large number, but these were key, key people for us for the full season," Frailey said. "We back-filled with part-time people and squeaked by, but we still don't know what we're going to have for the summer."

On Cape Cod, where the later tourist season dictates later deadlines for visa applications, business owners learned on Jan. 3 that the 33,000-visa cap for the second half of the fiscal year had been met. Nichols Bishop said she does not know of any Cape businesses that submitted applications before then.

Wendy Northcross, chief executive of the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce, said the agency has long sought alternatives to the visa program, trying to recruit on campuses and in the US Virgin Islands, but with limited success.

"Now there's a level of panic with some employers," she said. "It's almost too late."

For Hogan, the Nantucket restaurant owner, that could mean the loss of longtime employees from Jamaica, including cooks and counter help to sell his homemade doughnuts. The Downyflake serves 1,200 customers a day in the summer, he said, with a kitchen staff of 10 and 10 more workers on the floor.

At the Nantucket Regional Transit Authority, administrator Paula Leary said she is struggling to plan summer bus schedules without knowing who will drive the buses. The authority, which employs 30 to 40 drivers in the summer, normally hires 20 to 25 of them from Bulgaria, many on H-2B visas, she said.

Hiring new, inexperienced drivers - if they can be found - means long delays while they are licensed, said Darren Morris, general manager of Transit Connection Inc., which operates buses on Martha's Vineyard. Morris said he is trying to recruit foreign workers from Western ski resorts.

"Immigration is such a hot topic, it's thrown this program in a bad light," he said. "It's something that works, and it's been beat up."

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