

Dells' foreign work force drying up

Fewer able to get visas after change in U.S. policy

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Wisconsin Dells - For more than a decade, eastern European summer workers at the Tommy Bartlett Show and Exploratory have been as crucial to the attraction's success as the grinning water skiers in the human pyramid.

But due to changes to the national temporary guest-worker program and the weak American dollar, General Manager Tom Diehl and other Dells employers are facing an international labor shortage this summer.

"We have 27 (foreign workers) this year," Diehl said before the Tommy Bartlett Show opened its season Friday night. "Usually, we have no less than 60."

The nationwide crunch among tourist-town employers comes after Congress failed to renew a provision that exempted returning foreign guest workers from counting toward the limit of 66,000 per year. Without the exemption, applications for the H-2B visas were filled remarkably fast this year.

Some resorts and attractions in the Dells have gotten around that hurdle by hiring college workers on summer travel and work visas, known as J-1s, which aren't as restricted by the government. But as the region has grown into a year-round destination, employers need laborers for more than the summer, said Jerome Grzeca, an immigration attorney in Milwaukee.

"The problem is that if they really want that person to stay around, there's no legal way for them to hire that unskilled worker after four months," Grzeca said. "It's a service-sector economy, and there's a lack of local workers and lack of interest in these types of positions."

H-2B visas are good for up to a year, depending on the employer's needs, and can be extended to as long as three years.

Grzeca helped a major Dells employer navigate the painstaking process of applying for multiple H-2B employees for the summer when U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services on Jan. 3 reached its cap for the number of workers it would allow in the second half of the 2008 fiscal year.

Grzeca said his client was shut out from hiring about 25 guest workers even though it had followed every bureaucratic formality.

As Kathleen Campbell Walker, president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, put it: "Maxing out on a cap four months before the applicable period even begins shows how little relation there is between immigration policy and the needs of the economy."

Wisconsin Dells



Photo/[Joe Koshollek](#) Tiina

Tolonen, 24, of Finland bags cotton candy Friday for the Tommy Bartlett Show in Wisconsin Dells. Tolonen is back for her third year and is one of 27 foreign workers at Tommy Bartlett this year.



Photo/[Joe Koshollek](#)

Min-Yu Wa of Thailand rides the High Wire SkyCycle during her first day on the job at the Tommy Bartlett Exploratory. She learned how the ride works and how to load and unload riders from it.

Jobs in the Dells

■ The work force in Wisconsin Dells swells by about 7,000 in the summer. About half of those workers are from foreign countries.

■ Between December 2006 and November 2007, Wisconsin Dells supported almost 24,000 full-time jobs, a 1.4% increase over the previous year

■ Travelers spent more than \$1 billion in the Dells in 2007, an 8% increase over the amount spent by travelers in 2006.

Source: Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau

Boom with foreign help

The irony of the situation hasn't escaped those tuned in to the growth of tourism in Wisconsin Dells. The area couldn't have expanded to the blinking, beckoning mecca it has become without the help of guest workers.

Last year, visitors for the first time spent more than \$1 billion. But now that the region needs to keep foreign workers year-round to sustain that momentum, legal options to do so are limited.

Until a different immigration policy is passed, Grzeca is encouraging his clients to more aggressively recruit workers from U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico, Guam and the Virgin Islands.

Another option chosen by resorts such as the Wilderness Hotel & Golf Resort is to continent-hop and recruit student workers during their respective summers to cover all four seasons in Wisconsin.

"It was probably about five years ago when we got to have these really big resorts that we had to get very sophisticated in our recruitment," said Kim Marston, an employment manager at Wilderness, which added a 448-room conference center two years ago to capitalize on business travel year-round.

For instance, Marston explained, the resort looks to Brazil for winter work and recruits workers from Thailand, China and Vietnam for help in the spring.

At Noah's Ark water park, which employs about 300 area residents and 200 foreign workers every summer, Tim Gantz, president and co-owner, and Shelly Rucinski, director of operations, have been thwarted in their attempts to extend visas or obtain green cards for some of their best foreign employees.

Weakened dollar

Now the business relies on J-1 international students during the summer, but as the American dollar has weakened against the euro, potential student workers from places such as Poland and Hungary are no longer so interested.

"They can now go to England and Ireland to work and practice their English rather than spending the \$1,500 to \$2,000 in airfare and visa fees that it takes to come here," Rucinski said.

To fill the holes, Rucinski and Gantz have recruited in new countries. About 50 students are lined up to come from Nepal. However, nobody knows whether the students' professional and cultural expectations will jibe with the rest of the team.

At the Tommy Bartlett Show, Diehl and his staff devised new recruitment campaigns early this year aimed at college students from as far away as the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Diehl tried several years ago to recruit youths in Milwaukee for summer work, but the program fizzled when politics got involved. On top of that, he said many of the youths were unreliable workers, while others were unwilling to stay in the Dells for the whole summer.

Even smaller operations such as the budget-conscious 45-room International Motel on the far side of Wisconsin Dells' main drag may be pinched by this year's labor shortage. Owner-operator George Petrasz displayed a "hiring" sign outside the office last week, but one woman who inquired said she wasn't interested in housekeeping work. She wanted a desk job.

"Hopefully, I'll find somebody," Petrasz said. "If not, it's going to be a long summer."