

Losing workers? Blame Canada!

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BIZARRO WORLD NOT only exists in *Superman* comic books and "Seinfeld" episodes, it's alive and kicking in Alberta, Canada.

An oil boom. A robust economy. Universal health care - free next year.

What's unfolding in the western Canadian province of 3.5 million people is so far removed from Philadelphia's (and most of the country's) reality that, frankly, it's almost *bizarro*.

There's more. Highly lauded schools. Low crime rates. Low unemployment. Low taxes. A surplus of jobs.

But there's the rub: Not enough workers to fill the positions, expected to top 110,000 over the next decade, according to estimates provided by Alberta. So, government representatives have been visiting cities worldwide - including a stop today at the Westin Philadelphia Hotel - to entice potential employees to think Alberta.

"We're going through some really good times here, for sure," said Sorcha McGinnis, a spokeswoman for Alberta Employment and Immigration. "But we're experiencing labor shortages across every sector of our economy."

Specifically, Alberta needs architects, health-care professionals - nurses are in high demand - engineers and IT workers, McGinnis said. Last year alone, about 89,000 jobs were created and one out of every 13 involved oil, gas and mining extraction.

Alberta is specifically seeking foreign-born professionals living in the United States on H-1B visas - papers given to those with college degrees or equivalents - to apply for the Alberta Immigrant Nominee Program, she said. Potential employees could become permanent residents of Canada in six to 18 months.

Alberta's decision to entice immigrants angers and saddens some immigration lawyers.

"It absolutely hurts global competition," said Wendy Hess, a partner and business-

immigration lawyer with Goldblum & Hess in Jenkintown. "What Alberta is doing is brilliant. It's a sad commentary on the U.S. immigration policy, which doesn't recognize our need to remain globally competitive."

By contrast, John Miano, a fellow with the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C., believes Alberta's visit is no threat to the country's vitality.

"The reality is we get the first pick of the world's people," said John Miano, a fellow with the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C., a think tank with a "pro-immigration, low-immigration vision," according to its Web site.

"It's not a big threat to the U.S.," Miano said. Alberta is "trying to get second picks."

Hess said the U.S. should aim to keep foreign-born professionals "who will create jobs."

"What if we were sending the next Bill Gates to Alberta?" she asked.

Gates, or anybody, would probably enjoy living in a province where the largest city, Calgary, population 1.1 million, had just 30 homicides in 2007. And the health care will be free, thanks to all the oil and gas royalties. Prices for new houses rose nearly 5 percent in 2007.

There's no provincial sales tax, the equivalent of state sales tax. The lowest provincial income-tax rate in Canada. (A flat tax of 10 percent for singles earning over \$16,853 and \$39,655 for a family of four.)

Alberta representatives will hold its information session at 5:30 p.m. today at the Westin Philadelphia Hotel, on 17th Street near Market.

"We are hoping to attract H1-B holders hoping for more permanent residency, but we also have opportunities and we wouldn't deter anyone from attending this session," McGinnis said. The session will have information on all the immigration programs that people can apply to so that they can live and work in Canada.

About 11,000 H-1B visa-holders live in Pennsylvania, McGinnis said.

"Philadelphia is a great place for us to be, there's a large concentration of colleges and highly skilled professionals in the area," McGinnis said.

The Alberta government recently ran full-page ads in the *Daily News* and the *Inquirer*, asking: "Do you have an expiration date? Temporary skilled worker visa holders: Alberta, Canada welcomes you. Permanently."

"You'll never have to worry about expiring again. And, you can move here right away," the ad read.

But here's a sobering thought about Alberta: Snowfall begins in September, ends in May and averages about 4 feet, 2 inches each year in Calgary.