

Businesses Push for More Low-Skill Visas

By Sara Murray

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As Congress considers an immigration overhaul, an eclectic group of businesses is stepping up in support, eager to take advantage of new categories of low-skilled immigrant laborers the legislation would allow.

Proposals in both the House and Senate would allow hundreds of thousands of foreign workers to take on a broader set of U.S. jobs, opening a path for more immigrants to work on dairy farms, in meatpacking plants and on golf courses.

In addition to expanding the number of visas available, proposals in both chambers would make it possible for industries that aren't now able to turn to foreign labor to hire low-skilled and temporary workers. Employers as diverse as assisted-living facilities, mushroom farmers and nurseries are among those pushing to be included in any effort to rewrite the immigration laws.

These provisions haven't drawn as much attention as more hotly debated proposals to allow those already in the U.S. to move toward a path to citizenship. But the legislation, if enacted, would produce equally dramatic changes by opening the door to new categories of foreign workers, some of whom would be here only temporarily.

Some proposals also would allow immigrant workers to switch jobs once they arrive in the U.S. instead of tying them to a single employer. Many businesses strongly back those provisions, arguing that even though unemployment remains high, many unattractive jobs now stand unfilled, and that foreign labor will be integral to business expansion in the future. "There is no lesser-skilled visa program for most of the people who need one," said Tamar Jacoby, chief executive of business group ImmigrationWorks USA.

Some lawmakers see the proposals as an unjustified ploy for cheap labor. "Too-little noticed is the huge increase in low-skill immigration that has been driving efforts to pass a comprehensive immigration bill," says Sen. Jeff Sessions (R., Ala.), an opponent of the proposed overhaul. "This at a time when American workers have seen their wages fall and their job prospects continue to diminish."

One employer that might benefit is Medicalodges Inc., operator of skilled nursing and assisted living facilities in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. It employs some 2,300 across 30 locations, but is struggling to fill about 50 jobs, said chief operating officer Fred Benjamin.

The work is tough. Patients need to be lifted and bathed; some suffer from dementia and Alzheimer's disease. The pay, ranging from \$11.50 to \$22 an hour, hasn't appealed to enough applicants in rural areas where many facilities are located.

"I always say our first choice is to hire American workers," Mr. Benjamin said. But "we don't see a number of people standing in line to accept a [certified nursing assistant] job on the third shift

in Kinsley, Kan." The company can't use most existing visa programs, because they're designed for seasonal work.

The U.S. now has two main programs to bring in lower-skilled workers. H-2A visas for seasonal agricultural workers aren't capped, but just 65,000 were issued last fiscal year because of arduous rules, businesses say. H-2B visas, which cover temporary workers in jobs such as construction, housekeeping and meatpacking, are capped at 66,000 annually.

A broad immigration overhaul that has passed the Senate essentially keeps the seasonal H-2B program, but adds a new W visa, which would allow up to 220,000 new visas for lesser-skilled workers to stay in the U.S. year round, for as long as three years. They could also bring their spouses and children, who would be allowed to work.

For farmers, the Senate bill would allow more than 112,000 new visas per year, a number that could grow or shrink at the discretion of the secretary of agriculture. Companies could bring in workers year-round under visas lasting for three years.

In the House, which is only beginning to consider immigration bills, Republican Reps. Ted Poe of Texas and Raul Labrador of Idaho are crafting a guest-worker plan. Two people familiar with draft versions said it could provide as many as 400,000 visas for low-skilled workers in jobs outside of agriculture. A separate bill, which Republicans passed in the Judiciary Committee on a party-line vote, would replace the agricultural visa system with a program providing 500,000 farm visas that farmers and meatpackers could use year-round.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and in some cases, labor unions, have argued new low-skilled labor could make it even harder for Americans to find jobs in a tough economy. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated the Senate plan would cause wages to fall 0.3% for high-school dropouts and some workers with a high-school diploma.

Bert Lemkes, a co-owner of Van Wingerden International in Mills River, N.C., says he could use the help at his greenhouse. When he tries to fill open slots, he said, 30% of the workers don't make it through the first day. "It's monotonous, I guess is the word," Mr. Lemkes said of the \$9-an-hour jobs inside the greenhouse.

Mr. Lemkes met with Rep. Mark Meadows (R., N.C.) to urge that he support an immigration bill with a wider path for lesser-skilled workers. Mr. Meadows agrees. "Without additional farmworkers we end up having berries and peppers and corn that stay in the field," he said. "They need a workable guest worker program."

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