

In Alabama, Legal Immigrants Wanted for Dirty Jobs

By [Margaret Newkirk](#) and [Gigi Douban](#) on October 04, 2012

File this story under Unintended Consequences. HB 56, as Alabama's year-old immigration law is known, was supposed to drive illegal Hispanic immigrants from the state and free up factory jobs for natives. Workers cleared out, but a boom in hiring of Alabamians to chop chicken and clean fish hasn't materialized the way the law's backers had hoped. So employers are turning to another immigrant work force: refugees.

Esene Manga, a 22-year-old Eritrean refugee, moved from Atlanta to Albertville, in northeastern Alabama, just days after HB 56 took effect last year to work at a Wayne Farms poultry plant, where he now earns \$10.85 an hour cutting chicken breasts. The job is hard, but the money's good. "We are here to work," he says. Albert Mbanfu, refugee employment director for Lutheran Services of Georgia, says 19 other African refugees started at the factory at the same time. (People admitted to the U.S. as refugees are legally allowed to work the day they arrive.) The men are among hundreds of African and Haitian refugees, along with Puerto Ricans, unexpectedly benefiting from a labor shortage caused by HB 56. "The demand is still there," says Mbanfu. "Even now, if I called [Wayne Farms], they would say, 'Send all of them.'"

Frank Singleton, a spokesman for the Oakwood (Ga.)-based company, says too few locals were interested in or qualified to take jobs at its six Alabama plants, so it had to resort to "alternative methods and sourcing." The company found Africans displaced by war and conflict through East Coast Labor Solutions, a labor broker based in Fairlea, W. Va. "Our jobs are often in states where immigration laws have hit the hardest, and mostly in the poultry industry," says owner Ray Wiley.

Alabama's unemployment rate has dropped to 8.5 percent since HB 56 was enacted, though federal data show that's because the labor force shrank. State senator Scott Beason, a Republican sponsor of the law, isn't happy about the influx of new immigrants: "We would prefer [companies] hire native Alabamians."

The bottom line: A restrictive immigration law drained Alabama of migrant workers. Now poultry companies have found new labor: African refugees.

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