

Foreign labor numbers continue to drop

Ginette Bocanegra, Pacific Daily News Published 4:59 p.m. ChT Oct. 5, 2017



(Photo: Pacific Marketplace file photo)

A foreign workforce that used to average 1,500 in recent years is now down to only 56 workers, according to Greg Massey, with the Guam Department of Labor, who spoke to the Rotary Club of Guam Thursday about the ongoing problem of securing H-2B visas on Guam.

Massey, administrator for the labor department's Alien Labor Processing and Certification Division, said he recently returned from Washington, D.C, where a Guam delegation discussed the issue with administration officials. Also on the trip were Gov. Eddie Calvo, Sam Mabini, labor director, Robert Crisostomo the Guam director of military buildup, George Charfauros from homeland security, and Mark Calvo, the governor's chief of staff.

"We were well received at the meeting, but it continues to surprise me how little the mainland actually knows about Guam and what our situation is here," said Massey.

Massey also noted that President Trump was not present at the meeting because he was out visiting hurricane victims in Texas.

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Federal immigration officials, for more than a year have rejected nearly all applications by Guam businesses for the use of temporary skilled foreign labor under the H-2B visa program. The Guam Contractors Association and nearly a dozen Guam businesses sued in effort to force the visas to start moving

again, and the case is ongoing.

The federal government, in court documents, has argued Guam businesses have long abused a program intended only for the use of temporary labor.

Calvo in April said he could no longer support the military buildup as a result of the dwindling number of laborers. In late September, he called for a halt to military construction altogether until the issue is resolved.

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“Governor Calvo also spoke about national security, emphasizing we are not just a military base. He reminded them that this is also affecting the local infrastructure and our economy. Construction and home costs have increased about 25 percent already. At this rate, a two or three-bedroom house will soon cost about \$750,000,” said Massey.

A survey was conducted between the months of February and June this year, which addressed the number of construction workers currently employed in Guam versus the number of workers actually needed. “Based on the 726 (licensed contractors) respondents, we know that 3,600 workers is the number companies currently employ, but what they need is 5,000 new hires,” said Massey.

The military announced earlier this year a \$165.89 million contract to start building roads and other infrastructure at the site of the new Marine Corps base in Dededo which is expected to house over 5,000 troops as they relocate from Japan in about eight years.

“We stressed the workforce gap, to include carpenters, masons, and heavy metal workers to name a few, and informed them that we need to bring that number up to at least 4,700 individuals. There is a chilling effect to bidding right now, not only on the bases, but even recently in our own Guam Memorial Hospital because there is no real confidence to source the number of workers needed for these jobs,” said Massey.

Massey said the delegation's perspective was to find solutions.

“We didn’t discuss visa denials, because that is in the past. We proposed a solution instead changes in regulations. We asked that the governor have authority to decide how many workers are really needed, versus having someone sitting behind a desk in ...California who doesn’t really understand our

needs make these decisions for us," Massey said.

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