

H-2B applications slow to rise; nearly 1,800 foreign workers on Guam

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Published 6:03 p.m. ChT Oct. 7, 2018



(Photo: Frank San Nicolas/PDN)

Some contractors and employees said they're optimistic about their chances of bringing in more foreign workers, while recovering from the federal government's blanket denial of H-2B petitions for Guam starting late 2015.

Workers bring their families out for the GCA Family Day Picnic

The 2019 National Defense Authorization Act removes the federal cap on H-2B visas, but Guam can bring in more foreign laborers for construction and healthcare, according to Gov. Eddie Calvo.

More: [Trump signs \\$717B defense law. Here's what Guam would get \(/story/news/2018/08/15/trump-signs-717-b-defense-law-heres-what-guam-would-get/993954002/\)](https://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2018/08/15/trump-signs-717-b-defense-law-heres-what-guam-would-get/993954002/)

More: [33 Guam-bound workers denied visas, but 76 H-2B workers now on island \(/story/news/2018/06/28/33-guam-bound-workers-denied-visas-but-76-h-2-b-workers-now-island/740682002/\)](https://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2018/06/28/33-guam-bound-workers-denied-visas-but-76-h-2-b-workers-now-island/740682002/)

Hundreds of workers in the construction industry and their families gathered at the 26th annual Guam Contractors Association Family Day Picnic on Sunday at Ypao Beach Park.

Employees and guests from 31 companies gathered to barbecue, play competitive games, and spend time with their families and coworkers.

"GovGuam has their Labor Day picnic, and this is our version of it," said [Guam Contractors Association \(http://guamcontractors.org\)](http://guamcontractors.org) president James Martinez. "October is the month we celebrate careers in construction, so this is an opportunity for GCA members to get together, have some camaraderie and friendly competition, a big get-together for our industry."

1,779 foreign workers as of Sunday

Construction businesses are working to bring in H-2B laborers to supplement the local workforce.

In August, President Trump signed into law a \$717 billion [national defense spending \(/story/news/2018/08/15/trump-signs-717-b-defense-law-heres-what-guam-would-get/993954002/\)](https://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2018/08/15/trump-signs-717-b-defense-law-heres-what-guam-would-get/993954002/), which authorizes \$448.5 million in military construction projects on Guam.

The law builds on authorizations in the 2018 spending measure, allowing thousands of H-2B workers to support military buildup projects on Guam, and allowing admittance of healthcare workers as well.

As of Sunday, there were 1,779 positions filed with the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services \(https://www.uscis.gov/\)](https://www.uscis.gov/) by local companies, according to Calvo. The federal agency has approved 1,001 positions. Nearly 60 have been denied by USCIS and nearly 700 positions are pending, Calvo said in a weekly address.

"We continue to work with U.S. Department of Labor to expand apprenticeships and other programs that promote the growth of our local skilled and educated laborers," Calvo said. "I'm talking about jobs that pay anywhere \$14 to \$36 an hour."

Limited H-2B applications for civilian projects

A 2016 lawsuit filed by the Guam Contractors Association and nearly a dozen other businesses also helped employers trying to hire H-2B workers for non-military projects.

So far, only a few construction companies are applying for H-2B workers for civilian projects, according to Martinez.

"There have been some applications that have been submitted, but those are for skilled workers inside the base for federal projects," Martinez said.

"Right now, there's not as many companies as we thought there'd be that are applying for H-2B. I don't know if they're still gun-shy that they might get denied."

Some companies that have applied to hire H-2B workers have gotten requests from the federal government, for further evidence on why the companies

need foreign skilled laborers on their specific projects, Martinez said.

The USCIS is much more likely to approve military or military-related projects, he said.

Companies must also submit statements from the military to prove their projects are either for the military or related to the buildup, Martinez said.

Black Construction to bring nearly 150 workers for Andersen project

Leonard Kaae, senior vice president and general manager of Black Construction Corp. Guam, said the company is looking forward to bringing in nearly 130 to 150 foreign workers to Guam.

In September, the company was awarded an \$82 million contract (</story/money/2018/09/25/black-construction-gets-82-m-military-contract/1417766002/>) for design and construction of aircraft facilities at Andersen Air Force Base.

(Story continues below video.)

Black Construction Corp. is short on craft workers, although the company works to train and hire as many local workers as they can, Kaae said. The process of petitioning for H-2B workers is challenging, and must include clear and concise applications which state the use of workers will be temporary.

"It's a continuing evolving process," Kaae said.

The company is expecting a new batch of H-2B workers on Guam within the next two to three weeks, Kaae said.

'Getting better, little by little'

Martin Kenneth A. Gera, chief engineer and project manager at Modern International Inc., said the small business is expecting to bring in nine carpenters and 10 electricians before the end of the year.

H-2B applications for the 19 skilled laborers have been approved by the federal government, but the company is still waiting to hear back on applications for 10 masons and 10 air conditioning repairmen, Gera said.

Modern International Inc. (<http://www.modernintlinc.com/>) works on design and build projects; and civil, structural, architectural, electrical and mechanical work, and has previously completed contracts with the U.S. Navy and Air Force.

The company was set back when the federal government began denying H-2B petitions a few years ago, he said. The business currently employs about 40 to 50, according to Gera.

"It's getting better, little by little," Gera said. The issue is there aren't enough skilled laborers on Guam."

Optimistic for approvals

Ian Construction wasn't impacted too heavily by the federal government's denial of H-2B petitions, said company president and owner Ian Chong.

But without the option to bring in foreign laborers, the company's opportunity for growth would be limited.

Before the federal government began denying petitions for foreign laborers, nearly 80 percent of Ian Construction employees were Guam residents. Now, their workforce is entirely local.

Since the company is taking on larger projects, it needs more workers to support their growth.

Chong is waiting on applications to be processed for nearly 50 foreign carpenters, masons and mechanics from the Philippines, and isn't sure when they'll arrive, but Chong remains optimistic that they'll arrive in time for planned projects.

Reporter Chloe Babauta tells the stories of perpetuating culture, accountability on Guam's land issues, and island life. Follow her on Twitter [@chloebabauta](https://twitter.com/chloebabauta) (<https://twitter.com/chloebabauta>) and Instagram [@mestisachamorrita](https://www.instagram.com/mestisachamorrita) (<https://www.instagram.com/mestisachamorrita/>). Follow Pacific Daily News on Facebook/GuamPDN and Instagram [@quampdn](https://www.instagram.com/quampdn) (<https://www.instagram.com/quampdn/>).

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