

Bordallo: H-2B crisis fix for Guam in national defense bill

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(Photo: Frank San Nicolas/PDN)

The latest version of the defense budget for 2018 includes a provision that would allow Guam to have as many as 4,000 skilled temporary foreign workers per year, under the H-2B visa program, for projects related to the military buildup on Guam, according to Guam Del. Madeleine Bordallo.

Bordallo is part of the committee reconciling the House and Senate versions of the military budget. She is the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee's Readiness Subcommittee.

The revised defense bill prepared by the conference committee must be approved by the full House and Senate before it is presented to President Donald Trump for enactment.

Federal immigration officials in recent years have denied nearly all requests by Guam businesses to bring in foreign workers under the visa program, prompting a lawsuit last year by the Guam Contractors Association and nearly a dozen affected businesses.

The number of H-2B workers on Guam has dwindled, from more than 1,000 in recent years, to fewer than 50 in recent weeks. Most of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit no longer have H-2B workers on the payroll. The shortage of construction workers is expected to drive up construction prices, provided companies are able to take on the jobs at all.

According to Bordallo, the provision in the defense budget is limited to foreign workers for prime contractor or subcontractor services or labor required for construction, repair, renovation, or facility services directly connected to, or associated with, the Marine realignment on Guam.

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There are plans to transfer as many as 5,000 Marines from Okinawa and elsewhere to a new base in Dededo, as part of a larger realignment of U.S. military forces in the Asia-Pacific region. It's expected to cost \$8.6 billion, with Japan paying about \$3.1 billion of the cost.

Military officials have stated the buildup projects will require the use of large numbers of skilled foreign workers.

"While this is not a full solution for all business sectors, it does provide some relief to meet construction demands inside and outside the gate," Bordallo said in a statement. "I am committed to continue working for a broader solution to our workforce needs, especially in addressing the challenges impacting our healthcare industry, which will be further strained by increases in personnel related to the Marine realignment."

She said the defense budget provides clear flexibility for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to approve visas for skilled foreign workers under the federal H-2B program for the buildup projects.

Bordallo said the provision also extends Guam's exemption from the national H-2B visa cap until 2023, and would allow up to 4,000 H-2B visas per year to be approved for the island.

The case filed by local businesses, challenging the visa denials, is still pending, and U.S. District Court Chief Judge Frances Tydingco-Gatewood has asked for additional information in the case.

"USCIS's nearly 100 percent denial of H-2B visa applications for Guam has strained our economy and negatively impacted our ability to meet labor demands. I have worked hard to provide a solution through Congress to resolve this challenge," Bordallo stated.

Bordallo said she tried, but failed, to include a provision that would have allowed visas to be issued for civilian construction work and healthcare

workers.

"I fought hard for the full inclusion of the House provision during conference negotiations. At my urging, the Conference Committee adopted a compromise provision that provides relief for Guam's construction industry," she said.

Bordallo said she's hopeful the Trump administration will work with her on the broader solution and fulfill the president's personal commitment to Gov. Eddie Calvo, during a meeting last weekend in Hawaii, to resolve Guam's non-defense H-2B visa shortages.

While in Hawaii last weekend at a U.S. Pacific Command event, Calvo said Trump assured him that Guam's problem in getting H-2B visas approved will be resolved.

"This is a priority for me, Gov. Calvo, and the Legislature, and we are committed to continuing our 'One Guam' effort to resolve this crisis," Bordallo said.

Reporter Haidee Eugenio covers Guam's Catholic church issues, education, business and more. Follow her on Twitter @haidee_eugenio (https://twitter.com/haidee_eugenio). Follow Pacific Daily News on Facebook/GuamPDN (<http://www.facebook.com/guampdn/>) and Instagram @guammpdn (<http://instagram.com/GuamPDN>).

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