

# Contractors may consider H-2B visa workers from Mexico

Anumita Kaur, Pacific Daily News Published 6:14 p.m. ChT May 6, 2019

Contractors on Guam should consider sourcing workers from Mexico, in light of the ban on workers from the Philippines under the H-2B visa program, said Veronica Birkenstock, president and CEO of Practical Employee Solutions.

The Guam Department of Labor hosted Birkenstock on Monday to connect with local contractors and discuss solutions in sourcing workers for construction projects on island.

The Department of Homeland Security announced in January that the Philippines is no longer on the list of countries eligible to send workers to the U.S. under the federal H-2B programs at least for a year, citing a high rate of H-2B overstay from the Philippines.

**More:** [H-2B bans have far reaching impact, says Guam Contractors Association \(/story/money/2019/02/06/h-2-b-bans-have-far-reaching-impact-says-guam-contractors-association/2775204002/\)](#)

**More:** [New H-2B ban saddening, 5M Construction says \(/story/money/2019/01/24/new-h-2-b-ban-saddening-5-m-construction-says/2662745002/\)](#)

Mexico can provide a much needed answer to this problem, said Guam Department of Labor director David Dell'Isola, and it's necessary to diversify Guam's workforce.

"Currently we draw only from the Philippines, with the current environment with them off the eligibility list, we have to go through a lot of hoops and hurdles to get those names approved," Dell'Isola said. "We actually have to get a name list, it's a lot more delay, time and effort. It's a very volatile situation."



Veronica Birkenstock, Practical Employee Solutions president, right, speaks with Guam contractors regarding bringing in skilled, foreign labor to Guam from countries on the approved list. Previously, 100 percent of the island's H-2B employees came from the Philippines, but the country was recently taken off the list. (Photo: Courtesy of Hannah Iriarte, Guam Department of Labor special projects coordinator.)

According to Birkenstock, who has 30 years of experience in sourcing foreign labor for U.S. companies, Mexico is the largest source of H-2B visa workers in the U.S., the majority of whom already have experience as H-2B workers on mainland projects.

Her firm has 7,500 workers immediately available for contracts. All of these workers have prior mainland H-2B work experience.

## Less time

"As soon as an employer has a labor certification, and they've proved certification at homeland security, we can source workers and have them here

within 14 days to 21 days, which is probably faster than if you go through the Philippines," she said.

Sourcing workers from Mexico would mean that employers would not have to establish a name list prior to seeking certification, which is the case with attempting to petition for workers from the Philippines right now and the source of significant delays, Birkenstock said.

Wait times for appointments at the embassy for the H-2B process are also shorter, according to Birkenstock. An appointment at the Manila embassy can take up to 35 days to book, whereas appointments in Mexico can happen within a few days, due to the high volume of H-2B processes the country is accustomed to.

## No increase in cost

The cost of sourcing workers from Mexico is comparable to that of the Philippines as well, according to Birkenstock.

According to Guam Department of Labor administrator Greg Massey, the approximate cost of bringing 15 workers from the Philippines is anywhere from \$30,000 to \$40,000, depending on the project, types of workers and other factors.

"The only area where I see the costs is higher is in the air transportation," Birkenstock said.

While airfare costs are higher, employers would no longer need to deal with the Philippines Overseas Employment Agency, which is a necessary hurdle for employers seeking H-2B workers from the Philippines. The agency charges a substantial fee and takes significant time to process requests, Birkenstock said.

"When you look at the numbers, it may work out the same," she said. "I honestly think at the end of the day, that Mexico will probably even be a cost-savings."

Ideally, if Guam begins regularly sourcing workers from Mexico, a negotiation can be made with airlines to tackle high airfare fees, Birkenstock said.

"They would give us a contract rate for the entire year," she said.

The employers seeking H-2B workers would pay a firm, such as Birkenstock's, to assist in sourcing workers. The Guam Department of Labor would not pay a fee, and Birkenstock does not charge the H-2B workers. The fee for employers is based on how many workers are needed.

## Cultural, language hurdles

While some hurdles are anticipated culturally and linguistically, the hurdles are not insurmountable, Birkenstock and Dell'Isola said. Cultures in Mexico and on Guam have Spanish influence, which bridges some of the gap.

"There's always a learning curve," Birkenstock said. "There will definitely be a transition period."

Many federal contractors already have numerous Spanish-speaking employees and Spanish-language document options, Dell'Isola said. Many of the H-2B workers in Mexico have experience on U.S. bases as well, so the workers may speak some English.

"We're just trying to diversify the market," Dell'Isola said. "I hope that we can get that first test of H-2B people coming in and see how all that works out and get them working. I think it's important for us to not rely on one country, that we have options."

### READ MORE:

[Senator: If we're guessing on releasing offenders, we're completely negligent \(/story/news/local/2019/05/06/senator-if-were-guessing-releasing-offenders-were-completely-negligent/1114267001/\)](/story/news/local/2019/05/06/senator-if-were-guessing-releasing-offenders-were-completely-negligent/1114267001/)

[Man, 41, dies after auto-pedestrian crash on Toto-Canada Road \(/story/news/local/2019/05/06/man-41-dies-after-auto-pedestrian-crash-toto-canada-road/1115780001/\)](/story/news/local/2019/05/06/man-41-dies-after-auto-pedestrian-crash-toto-canada-road/1115780001/)

Read or Share this story: <https://www.guampdn.com/story/news/local/2019/05/06/contractors-may-consider-h-2-b-visa-workers-mexico/1114947001/>