

Guam faces foreign labor shortage

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(Photo: PDN file)

Without a change in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' 99.9 percent denial rate for temporary H-2B visas, Guam could end up with a skeleton pool of skilled foreign construction workers by the end of this year, local Labor Department statistics show.

The number of skilled workers on island on H-2B visas could drop to less than 100 by the end of the year, from 1,689 at the start of the fiscal year last October, if the rate of denials continues, said Greg S. Massey, administrator of the Alien Labor Processing and Certification Division for the Guam Department of Labor.

Masons, carpenters, electricians, structural steel workers and plumbers are among foreign workers on H-2B visas who have been part of the Guam construction industry's labor force for decades.

More than 98 percent of these workers are from the Philippines, Massey said. Guam's construction industry used to bring in workers from China, but the federal government no longer allows workers from China to be brought into the United States on H-2B visas.

Employers tend to bring in workers from the Philippines, perhaps because they assimilate well to Guam, the Philippines has an available pool of skilled workers, and the airfare is reasonable, Massey said.

Guam Delegate Madeleine Bordallo, who is seeking re-election, said last week the planned Marine Corps base construction in Guam could be adversely affected.

"I am especially concerned by recent news that Core Tech will be sending nearly 400 workers back to their country because of denials of their visa renewals as well as by Guam Department of Labor's estimate that less than 100 H-visa workers will be on Guam at the end of the year," Bordallo said in a press release.

Bordallo recently sent a letter asking USCIS to allow H-2B visa workers to continue working in Guam until the defense spending bill is passed with a longer term solution to the problem.



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In the defense spending bill that passed the House earlier this year, Bordallo was allowed to include language for the continued hiring of H-2B workers in Guam for the construction and health care industries. The Senate and House leadership are working to reconcile both sides' version of the defense spending bill.

However, between last year and early this year, USCIS has been denying many of Guam employers' applications to hire or renew the existing employment of skilled workers on H-2B visas.

And Guam officials have been trying to get the federal government to get an answer as to why. In some Guam employers' experience, USCIS has asked for justification why they continue to hire foreign workers when the nature of H-2B visas is supposed to be temporary, said immigration attorney Ladd Baumann, in a previous interview.

Guam Labor Department statistics show that in the first five months of this year, USCIS approved H-2B visas for six foreign workers, out of applications for 2,475 positions, or a denial rate of more than 99 percent.

Former Gov. Felix Camacho, who's challenging Bordallo in the delegate race, said the mass rejection of H-2B visas is "extremely detrimental to Guam's economy."

"History shows that Guam cannot do away with H-2B workers as the island does not have a sustainable labor force, and the tyranny of distance from the U.S. mainland makes it difficult to attract enough U.S. workers from the mainland," Camacho said.



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At this point, only President Obama can bring about an immediate solution by using his executive authority to reverse the high rate of denials of H-2B visa applications for Guam and the nation, Camacho said.

Guam's delegate should seek a meeting immediately with the president and make the case that the skilled labor shortage causes damage to the island economy, he said.

Bordallo's proposal in the defense spending bill helps big military contractors, Camacho said, "but what happens to a family just trying to build a first home?"

Construction costs will rise and schedules will be delayed in favor of big federal projects, he said.

Camacho suggested a Guam-specific legislation that creates a unique program for the island to meet the demands of the military and local construction projects.

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