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EDITOR'S PICK

## Guam's foreign labor hiring reaches 27-year record high

HAIDEE EUGENIO GILBERT | THE GUAM DAILY POST

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**PEAK YEARS BEGIN:** Construction continues on Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz as seen Feb. 14 in Dededo. The base is being developed to host nearly 5,000 Marines being relocated from Okinawa. Post file photo

Guam is now beginning to enter the peak years of the military buildup, bringing to a 27-year high the number of skilled foreign labor hired to work mostly on military buildup-related construction.

The island has had more than 2,600 workers under the federal H-2B visa program since March, Guam Department of Labor Director David Dell'Isola said.

Just a few years ago, the H-2B worker population dropped from about 1,500 in 2015 - to zero in early 2018 over a federal policy position change.

As of Monday, the number of H-2B workers on Guam was 2,623 and often fluctuates over normal departures and arrivals, according to Greg Massey, administrator of Labor's Alien Labor Processing and Certification Division.

"It is the highest number since November 1995," Massey told The Guam Daily Post. "We are now in the beginning of the peak years of the military buildup."

By the end of fiscal 2023, it is very likely the number of H-2B workers could reach 6,000 based on the trends that GDOL is seeing, he said.

The buildup is meant to accommodate the transfer of nearly 5,000 U.S. Marines and about 1,500 family members from Okinawa, Japan to Guam.

The Marines' relocation is part of the agreement between the United States and Japan to reduce the presence of U.S. troops in Okinawa and relocate them to Guam, Hawaii and elsewhere.

Japan is paying \$3 billion of the \$8 billion relocation cost.

To support the military construction projects, Guam has relied in significant part on the H-2B visa worker program while also working on building a local skilled workforce.

Massey said the increase in H-2B numbers has steadily risen in the last three years and has contributed to helping stabilize the economy as construction was one of the industries that continued to operate unabated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The strong construction industry has contributed jobs for local residents in construction and in other industries which support construction activities," Massey said.

The federal policy position change on the H-2B program and then the pandemic has limited the number of foreign skilled labor to work on military and civilian projects, which was also a factor in increased costs for simple home renovations.

Massey and Dell'Isola also said the increase in H-2B registration fees has also helped provide needed dollars for apprenticeships and job training for local workers.

A 2018 Guam law raised the H-2B registration fee from \$1,091 to \$2,091 per H-2B worker petitioned for Guam. Most of the fee goes to the Guam Community College's Apprenticeship Training program and the rest goes to GDOL.

"We expect that with all the facilities and infrastructure being built, that local workers will benefit from long term employment for the sustainability and maintenance of these facilities which is not normally done by temporary foreign workers," Massey said.

Nearly all of the H-2B workers are from the Philippines.

In February, Guam also had five H-2B workers from South Korea, two from Australia and one from New Zealand, Massey said.

At this time, he said, GDOL does not see any interest in other source markets in any significant number.

In 2020, Guam saw the first H-2B workers from Mexico. Massey said those workers have since left the island after their Guam employer completed its project.

The development of the Marine Corps base, named in honor of the late Brig. Gen. Vicente "Ben" Blaz, the first CHamoru Marine to reach the rank of general, is ongoing.

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