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IMMIGRATION

Employers say economy needs immigrant workers

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The face of the immigrant worker in South Florida takes many forms: the Colombian roofer, the Spanish banker on Brickell, even the Chinese dancer for the Miami City Ballet.

Record low unemployment rates over the past year have led many South Florida companies to increasingly rely upon these workers to bolster their workforce, especially in highly skilled areas. As the debate continues in Washington over immigration reform, some local companies say they are already losing workers fearful of the restrictive House bill. Many others are hoping the Senate version, which would create a guest worker program and raise caps on other employment-based visas, will soon come to pass.

Take the Miami City Ballet. About a third of the ballet company, including many of its principals, are here on foreign work visas. That's especially true for its male dancers, who are more difficult to find in the United States.

"We get a lot of dancers from South America and Cuba, but we also have dancers from China, all over Europe and Japan," said Executive Director Pamela Gardiner. "If we couldn't do that, I don't know how you would run a ballet company."

Limiting the number of visas, especially for highly skilled immigrants, is counterproductive to economic growth, especially in South Florida, says immigration lawyer Luis Cordero.

"We have an incredible need," said Cordero, who has processed dozens of visas, green cards and citizenship applications for dancers as part of his pro bono work for the organization.

In South Florida, the need for foreign professionals is especially strong in hospitality, healthcare and construction industries -- sectors already stretched thin for workers because of record low unemployment.

This year, 65,000 specialty H-1B worker visas were allowed for the entire country. That cap was already hit a few weeks ago -- meaning no more new applications until 2007. The demand is such that it's even straining green card application quotas, says immigration lawyer Enrique Gonzalez.

"Before, at least, we were channeling people through green cards," said Gonzalez, managing partner of the Miami office of Fragomen, Del Rey, Bernsen and Loewy. "Now, the problem is compounded with not only are we hitting the H-1 quota, we're hitting the green card quota in the skilled worker category."

The Senate's proposal for immigration reform would increase the annual cap of H-1B visas from 65,000 to 115,000. If the cap is reached in any given year, it would increase 20 percent the following year. It would raise caps for other employment-based visas, and it also proposes creating a new exemption for any workers with advanced degrees in science, technology, engineering or math from any foreign university. It would also increase limits on other employment-based visas and attempt to streamline the visa and labor certification processes.

The fact that each year, the cap for H-1B visas keeps getting hit earlier is a sign of the great unmet demand for highly skilled, highly educated immigrants, said Kathleen Newland, director of the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute in Washington.

While some detractors argue the skilled worker visas can lower wages for certain groups, like computer programmers, she said there was no doubt that access to skilled labor was vital to U.S. economic growth.

"The U.S. sucks in almost half of the highly skilled immigrants from the whole world," she said. "That really does give us a competitive advantage."

Fragomen represents more than half the Fortune 500 companies on corporate immigration matters. Gonzalez says he's seen the need for skilled workers increase dramatically here over the past 12 to 18 months.

One of his foreign banking clients here can't bring in two senior executives from Mexico because of visa cap limits. Only local healthcare organizations aren't having as many problems, because many are affiliated with universities that are exempt from the H-1B cap, he said.

In the local construction industry, the need for bilingual foremen and supervisors is so great it has led several large companies to recruit workers through foreign worker visa programs, said Eric Kennedy, vice president of the local branch of industry group Associated Builders and Contractors.

Miami-Dade-based Murton Roofing tried for two years to bring in roofers via one visa program that would allow 50,000 workers from Mexico, said President Michael Levine.

"Both years, we were told by the first week in January that the quota was done and we couldn't get anyone," said Levine, who has sent recruiters to Puerto Rico to try to find workers there.

Levine, who employs about 300 people here, thinks the restrictive immigration proposals are unrealistic in thinking that there are people in the United States who are going to do the many jobs immigrants do. He said immigration raids on work sites have already caused one or two of his workers, who had been verified as legal, to disappear.

"Let's face it, working on a roof doesn't excite too many people, even though the pay is pretty good," he said.

The House bill would make illegal immigration a felony and proposes tougher penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants. It contains no provisions for a temporary guest worker program.

The fear created by that bill has already cost Fort Lauderdale-based Alternative Home Health Care about 20 workers, says owner Carla Albano. The company employs about 400 healthcare workers in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area.

"If you're an immigrant and you're hearing that there is no chance that your children can come here, a lot of people are choosing to go back," she said.

"As a business owner, I think that there needs to be an acknowledgement that America is built upon immigrants," she added. `` There needs to be a process so most people don't think that the door is going to be slammed."