

Temporary Workers, Lasting Impact; Thousands of employers depend on temporary foreign workers with special visas. See page D7 for their stories and read how immigration law affects the local economy.

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Author: Krissah Williams - Washington Post Staff Writer

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The iPod-carrying lifeguard watching over the rooftop pool at the posh Park Connecticut apartments, the physics teacher at Suitland High School and several laborers all have one thing in common: They are among the foreign workers who keep the local economy running, turning up more and more often in unexpected jobs.

Arlington's High Sierra Pools, which once counted on eager American teenagers to occupy its lifeguard chairs, now fills nearly half of its 500 jobs with young people from Bulgaria, Poland, Peru and elsewhere.

Almost all of the 80,000 horses in Maryland are now bathed, brushed and fed by migrants.

And Leroy Dixon's family-owned tent company in Glen Burnie employs a half-dozen Mexican workers through a visa program for circus laborers because, Dixon said, local workers usually quit when they are asked to put up a tent on a Sunday night or hoist a canopy before dawn.

Employers who say they are feeling the pinch in a region marked by low unemployment and relatively high wages more often are turning to foreign workers, who have gone far beyond jobs they dominate such as cutting lawns and programming software.

They are here on a variety of visas, some reserved for students, others for professionals and laborers permitted to work for nine-month stints. A Washington Post review of a Department of Labor database of companies that petitioned for foreign workers last year revealed that thousands of employers in the District and its suburbs sought tens of thousands of guest workers, most with little shot at permanent residency.

Employers in the District requested 4,904 foreign workers through the H-1B program, which allows U.S. employers to hire foreign professionals, and 107 of those requests were made by the city's school system. In Maryland, 399 employers requested 8,209 temporary foreign workers through the H-2B and H-2A programs, which allow seasonal industries and farms to hire guest workers. Six Flags America in Mitchellville alone requested permission to hire 225 temporary workers to keep its roller coasters roaring at peak season. In Virginia, 1,029 employers requested temporary foreign workers through the H-2B and H-2A programs last year.

Not all requested workers are approved, but their numbers, along with those of immigrants on long-term visas, keep expanding. From 1990 to 2000, the region's foreign-born population grew by about 70 percent. Since 2000, it has grown by at least 23 percent, to more than 1 million. About 300,000 other foreigners work here illegally, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Local employers who import foreign workers said they are heavily dependent on the migrants they employ. A half-dozen said they will continue hiring through the government's guest-worker program, keeping the local economy churning despite last month's congressional failure to overhaul immigration law.

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer

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