

For unskilled workers, getting a visa is hard

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Body

Why don't illegal immigrants play by the rules and come here legally to work in places like poultry plants and carpet mills?

Most of them can't.
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The federal government gives visas that let foreign nationals come to the United States for a specific job, but it has no visa category that would cover the thousands of illegal immigrants in low-wage jobs around Georgia.

"The people don't have papers because there are no papers for these kinds of jobs," said Remedios Gomez Arnau, consul general of Mexico in Georgia and neighboring states.

President Bush and other politicians were pushing last year to let U.S. companies legally import immigrant workers, but momentum fizzled after Sept. 11.

The government has visas for unskilled agricultural workers, called H-2A visas. Several Georgia farmers get them to bring in Latino immigrants to help harvest the Vidalia onion and other crops.

Another kind of visas for unskilled workers, called an H-2B visa, often is used for jobs in forestry. It's unsuitable for jobs in the construction, landscaping, poultry and carpet industries, which attract thousands of illegal immigrants, Gomez said, because the visas are temporary and hard to get.

Estimates of the illegal immigrant population in Georgia vary. Some immigrant advocates put the number around 250,000.

Federal law says U.S. companies can't knowingly hire illegal immigrants and that illegal immigrants can't legally work, but Gomez said the reality is quite different. The Immigration and Naturalization Service rarely fines businesses for employing illegal immigrants, and academics say economies all over the Southeast have come to rely on the labor of illegal immigrants.

Graphic

For unskilled workers, getting a visa is hard

Photo: Remedios Gomez Arnau, consul general of Mexico

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