

Laborers fill in a gap at tuxedo company;
Mexican employees with special work visas help After
Hours through peak season. It's a rising U.S. trend.<

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Body

Every spring, Luis Rangel leaves his Mexico City home and comes to Chester County to work for \$9 an hour cleaning tuxedos for a formal-wear company.

When the spring stampede for tuxedos eases in June, Rangel and about 80 other temporary workers will return to Mexico.

"I'm here for the money," said Rangel, 29, who works at After Hours by Small's. "I'm going to invest it in my taxi business back home."

Rangel is one of about 42,000 seasonal guest workers from overseas who come to the United States on special work visas to fill low-skill service jobs viewed by many as undesirable. With visas different from those held by foreign guest workers in agriculture or the technology sector, employees such as Rangel frequently work in resorts, hotels and ski centers.

Though such workers are rare in the region - fewer than 500 are employed here - their number is rising nationally, according to the Labor Department. Some business officials see them as the wave of the future in the global economy.

Rangel and 86 other temporary workers from Mexico earn what they consider good wages filling the dreaded night shift at After Hours, a formal-wear company based in Atlanta that has 15 stores in the Philadelphia area, including a regional distribution center in West Chester. In turn, the company gets a motivated, bankable work force.

"We just could not fill the needs we had with local workers," said Marty Cotten, the company's regional vice president. "We are very proud of this program. It was thinking outside of the box."

Here's how it works: After Hours recruits workers in Mexico City, gets them temporary work visas, and hires them for a stint in the spring when teenagers need tuxedos for the prom. The company shares travel and living expenses with the workers and drives them to the job each day.

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"The Philadelphia region does not have the same international connections as other areas, so we may not have explored this alternative - yet," said David Thornburgh, executive director of the Pennsylvania Economy League, a public-policy research organization. "But I think the future will be full of this kind of creative problem-solving."

The After Hours program began in 1988 when the Glah family that owned Small's made contacts in Mexico after a family member married into a family there. The program continued when After Hours acquired Small's in 2000.

At the sprawling center in West Chester - which services stores and wholesalers in the Northeast and contains 63,123 tuxedo coats, 62,975 pairs of shoes, and more than 100,000 ties - temporary workers take the shift that few want, say company officials: the night shift, from 5:30 p.m. to 4 a.m.

During that shift, workers clean, press and repackage garments that have been worn and are on order.

In a county where the unemployment rate is below 3 percent, the company tries to hire locally in West Chester, Cotten said, where it has about 150 employees. In fact, during the spring rush, After Hours adds temporary local hires - but they are unwilling to work the night shift.

On the other hand, "the Mexican workers are so hardworking," said production manager Tim Queen. "They want to be here."

Bringing workers from Mexico begins months before the spring prom and wedding season. Some workers are recruited; others return annually and recommend relatives, Queen said.

Workers split the round-trip airfare cost with the company, he said - about \$500. They also agree to split the \$800-a-month rent for apartments that the company finds them.

Drinking alcohol is prohibited for workers. And dating is frowned upon. Recruits said the trade-offs are worth it for one reason - the money.

"Everything I make here is used to put my kids through school," said Barbara Arias, 53, of Toluca, Mexico.

Receiving the same pay as their American counterparts within the company, Arias and others can earn \$5,000 during the two-month stint, Queen said. This is more than she earns in Mexico, Arias noted, where per capita income was \$4,440 in 1999, the last year that figures were available, according to the World Bank.

"Guest worker programs like this give the Mexicans some legal ground to stand on," said Jeffrey Cohen, a Penn State anthropology professor who specializes in Mexican migration. "They are not illegal, and they tend to get paid better. In many ways, it's a win situation for everyone involved."

Some experts said the arrangement raises issues about using local versus foreign workers.

"Critics of this would say, 'The employer didn't try hard enough to hire locally,'" said Charles Keely, a Georgetown University professor of international migration. "The employer would say, 'You come up here to try to find these workers this time of year.'"

With H-2B visas, foreign workers may stay in the United States for up to a year to perform nonagricultural seasonal work. Before After Hours can get these visas for workers from Mexico, the Labor Department must certify that local workers are not available.

The department does this by requiring employers to advertise the jobs in local newspapers and by having the state test the labor market for worker availability, said Dale Ziegler, chief of the department's division of foreign labor certification.

Of 88,172 positions certified nationally for such workers in 2000, 509 were for businesses in Philadelphia and 1,725 for New Jersey enterprises.

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Congress limits to 66,000 the number of H-2Bs issued annually. In 2000, 42,482 such visas were issued, up from 31,049 in 1998 and 36,503 in 1999. The number of positions certified is greater than the number of H-2B visa holders, Ziegler said, because employers often certify more positions than they need as a cushion against a changing labor market.

Securing the paperwork may be complicated, but the effort is worth it, said After Hours officials, because the program is so successful for them.

The workers agreed. For David Maya, 31, a native of Mexico City who works in West Chester each spring, the job is lucrative.

"The economic situation in Mexico isn't that good," he said. "I had to take advantage of this opportunity."

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Graphic

PHOTO;

LAURENCE KESTERSON, Inquirer Suburban Staff - Luis Rangel sorts tuxedos at After Hours, Chester County. The firm recruits workers in Mexico City, gets them temporary visas, and hires them for a stint in the spring, during prom season.

Perla Rodriguez Davila, a native of San Mateo, is one of more than 80 Mexican employees who traveled to West Chester for the two-month job at After Hours. Some earn \$5,000 in that period.

Says Barbara Arias, of Toluca, Mexico: "Everything I make [at After Hours] is used to put my kids through school."

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