

Rep. Billy Long (MO-7) Member's Day Testimony for the Record

House Committee on Appropriations

Subcommittee on Homeland Security

Tuesday, April 9, 2019

Opening

Good afternoon Chairwoman *Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for allowing me to come before you today to speak on the importance of the H-2B seasonal worker visa program.

Many of us in this room represent districts with various small and seasonal businesses that are struggling to find local workers to fill seasonal, temporary jobs. Despite extensive efforts to recruit locally, these seasonal employers in business sectors such as hospitality, resorts, carnivals, seafood processing, forestry and landscaping rely on temporary, non-immigrating foreign workers through the H-2B visa program to supplement their American workforce to accommodate the massive flows of visitors during the busy summer months. Without this program, local businesses and both the regional and national economy suffer because there simply are not enough American workers available during these peak and shoulder-season months. I am here today to ask for your support to include key H-2B visa program provisions in the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Fiscal Year 2020 proposal.

H-2B Visas

Many employers who use seasonal workers are in a crisis. They are beginning their season of highest economic opportunity without either adequate numbers of willing and capable US workers and without access to the much needed and valuable foreign non-immigrating temporary workers through the H-2B visa program.

Unfortunately, this program has got caught up in larger important policy debates over both legal and illegal immigration. It is important to point out that these workers are not immigrants. They provide an opportunity for businesses to operate at a greater capacity, retain their full-time workers and contribute to their local economies.

The H-2B program sustains American jobs. In fact, every H-2B visa issued supports 4.6 American jobs on average. The H-2B visa program allows seasonal businesses to continue to fulfill their contracts, retain their American workers, make additional capital investments, expand their businesses and maximize their contribution to the American economy.

Unfortunately, there is a statutory cap on the total number of individuals who may be issued an H-2B visa or otherwise granted H-2B status during a fiscal year. The program's annual 66,000 visa cap (with a maximum of 33,000 available during the first half of any given fiscal year and 33,000 for workers who begin employment in the second half of the fiscal year) is not adequate to meet the demands of a growing economy.

According to recent Department of Labor data, the demand for temporary, seasonal works, with a start date between April 1, 2019 and the end of the fiscal year 2019, exceeds 95,000 workers – almost three times the number of available H-2B visas for that time period. Often, the cap is reached literally within days of when work petition applications are accepted. The program has essentially become a lottery, as the demand for visas is far greater than what is issued, leaving many seasonal employers excluded from the program with no access to legal seasonal laborers, leading to potential reductions in operating hours and closures.

Without action, it is inevitable that the H-2B visa cap will be reached early on in the fiscal year 2020. An increase in the H-2B visa allotment would certainly be a big step in the right direction.

Missouri and H-2B Visas

I understand first-hand the importance of this program. Missouri's Seventh Congressional District, which I represent, is a tourism hotspot. There are not enough capable and willing Missouri workers available to fill all of the peak season jobs.

I am proud to represent, such entertainment centers as Branson, MO., a small town of just over 11,000 taking in 8 ½ million visitors every year. The deficiency in finding available employees in Branson affects everything from hotels, to restaurants, to theme parks, to landscaping businesses – these are employers who have tried for years to fill the need for employees with locals and have been unable to do so. The H-2B program provides the Branson community and many other destination cities across the country the ability to find employees so they can provide their services to the public. These seasonal destinations are very much dependent upon such a program for commerce in the area to effectively function.

I would also like to point out that the demand for seasonal employees is not limited to just tourism destinations in my district either. I have had numerous businesses throughout southwest Missouri that rely heavily on seasonal labor be forced to pass on substantial contracts or bidding on large projects because they are unable to procure a workforce. This is despite offering higher pay and benefits. When H-2B visas are not available to these employers to fill the gaps and to help them have the people needed to complete projects, we all lose. Simply put, there are just not enough able individuals available to fill the job openings.

Conclusion

Again, I appreciate the Committee's continued willingness to listen to the views of Members like myself. I know the Appropriations Committee will face tough decisions on priorities for fiscal year 2020. For this reason, I respectfully ask for your support to include key

H-2B visa program provisions in the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Fiscal
Year 2020 proposal.