

Immigration system 'broken'

Desperate employers face frustration

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B.C. employers trying to fill jobs with foreign workers are frustrated by a government system they say does a better job keeping people out of the country.

"It is a total nightmare for my clients," said Vancouver immigration lawyer Rudolf Kischer, who works with employers struggling to bring in skilled temporary workers from overseas. "At this point, the system is broken. It can take a year to get someone here, and that's a disaster for employers."

A new pilot project launched by federal Minister of Human Resources and Social Development Canada in September was supposed to speed up the process of getting skilled workers to B.C. -- which needs to fill an estimated 350,000 new jobs by 2016.

The pilot project fast-tracks workers in 12 occupations in the construction, tourism, hospitality and health-care sectors so rather than waiting up to five months for a government "Labour Market Opinion" on the need for temporary foreign workers, employers get an answer in five days.

The problem is that B.C. employers desperate for workers in occupations not on the fast-track list -- such as cooks, rebar installers and welders -- are waiting six weeks for the government to agree foreign workers are needed. And when employers get a favourable Labour Market Opinion, they face another hurdle with immigration officials overseas who approve temporary visas.

Kischer said one frustrated local construction-company owner spent tens of thousands of dollars to set up interviews and test prospective employees in one country only to have every one of the workers rejected for work visas.

"We're not talking about 20-year-old punks -- these were very stable individuals with families and homes," he said.

"They would have been making \$60,000 a year here, but they can just go to other countries. We're not the only country short of employees."

Philip Hochstein, president of the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association, said carpenters and crane operators made the government's fast-track list, but the construction industry faces a growing shortage of workers in every other



CREDIT: Gerry Kahrmann - The Province

Employers note that rebar installers are in one category of foreign workers not included on Ottawa's fast-track for a federal 'Labour Market Opinion.'

trade.

As well, employers must apply for a Labour Market Opinion each time they need workers, a process that includes advertising the job across the country to prove there are no Canadians available to do the job.

"If one roofing company says it needs 10 more roofers, you have to go through the LMO, and the next day, if a different roofing company needs a roofer, it has to do the same thing," Hochstein said.

"It is just terrible, and the system is not helping the industry much."

Ian Tostenson, CEO of the B.C. Restaurant and Food Services Association, said the fast-tracking system works well for hotels and restaurants seeking temporary foreign workers to fill some jobs. But the industry's biggest shortage is in the kitchen -- and cooks are not on the list, he said.

"We think this will be resolved," Tostenson said. "When Ottawa gets it, we think it will be quick to change."

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