

Nonprofit: H-2A is misused, leading to abuse of foreign guest workers

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BY CESAR NEYOY - BAJO EL SOL

SAN LUIS, Ariz. — Mexicans seeking agricultural jobs in the Yuma area and elsewhere in the United States under the H-2A guest worker program often fall victim to unscrupulous job recruiters, according to the head of a nonprofit that wants to curtail the abuses.

The recruiters, who travel to Mexico and other foreign countries to extract hefty fees from workers in return for the promise of jobs, represent one of the most frequent abuses in the federal government's H-2A program, says Janine Duron, executive director of Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agricolas (CITA), or Independent Agricultural Workers' Center in San Luis Rio Colorado, Son.

“At CITA, we are working very closely with the workers to guide them and prevent them from becoming victims of abuse,” she said. Unscrupulous recruiters “charge them to obtain a visa and place them in economic hardship, many times without there even being a job prospect.”

With funds from a \$1 million grant from the Buffet Foundation to Catholic Relief Services, the San Luis Rio Colorado-based organization is opening “farm worker support centers” in Chiapas, Oaxaca and San Luis Potosi and other interior Mexican states from where many of the guest workers hail, Duron said.

The goal is for the centers, working with growers and employers on this side of the border, to line up the workers without charge, thereby giving them an option to recruiters demanding payments. Duron says CITA hopes to recruit about 50,000 workers.

Catholic Relief Services, working with the Catholic diocese in Tucson and Mexicali, Baja Calif., created CITA as a binational nonprofit organization that connects workers with U.S. growers needing labor.

The H-2A program was established by the U.S. government to allow growers to employ foreign guest workers on temporary work visas to fill any seasonal jobs for which they can't find domestic labor. The employers apply to the government for whatever number of H-2A visas they need for foreign workers.

But a report done earlier this year by Farmworker Justice, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization, concluded that the H-2A program has been misused to exploit foreign workers, who are lured by the promise of earning many times more in wages than they could earn in their own countries.

Unscrupulous recruiting has led to numerous cases of human trafficking and forced labor, according to the report, titled “No Way to Treat a Guest: Why the H-2A Agricultural Visa Program Fails U.S. and Foreign Workers.”

“It's gotten to the point where organized crime has gotten involved and ends up charging the workers,” said Duron.

“There's a huge need there (in Mexico for employment),” she added. “Many of those workers are farmers who were hurt by the Free Trade Agreement, and now that they're looking for work, they can be easy victims of abuse.”

Read more: <http://www.yumasun.com/articles/workers-75125-foreign-program.html#ixzz1gKqDUdaH>