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Bridging the Job Gap

By Bill Mayville

With unemployment so high and the economy so weak, you might think employers in Palm Beach County's clubs and resorts could easily fill jobs with qualified job seekers. Unfortunately for both employers and job seekers, it's not that simple.

In Palm Beach County, where tourism and our seasonal population drive the economy, we're faced with a gap. Despite the many benefits and inducements we provide to hire American workers, we can't get enough qualified Americans to take jobs – especially as waiters, waitresses, and dishwashers willing to work for just a portion of the year. While most of our workers are American, there is a job gap and it needs to be bridged if we are to maintain Palm Beach County's economic vitality and renowned reputation for hospitality.

According to the Workforce Alliance, the government agency set up to help unemployed workers find jobs, some 65 percent of employer job openings went unfilled at the height of the 2009 recession. Despite the strong efforts by Workforce Alliance, they're still unfilled today.

As a result, companies like Workaway International bridge the gap by finding reliable guest workers to fill temporary seasonal positions so our clubs and residential communities can help maintain the area's economic advantage as the place to go for sterling service.

If we had a choice, we'd hire only qualified Americans. From an economic viewpoint, foreign guest workers cost employers more than Americans. We pay foreign and domestic workers the same wages, but employers must bear the cost of flying the guest workers round trip from their home countries to Palm Beach, pay visa and airport processing fees, ground transportation expenses, health care and other costs.

In addition, Workaway and its club clients also are required to pay taxes, including Social Security, Medicare, unemployment, and workers compensation for guest workers, just as we do for Americans.

Even with unemployment high and the economy struggling, the fact is that the clubs have been unable to find American workers to fill these temporary jobs and pass the police and drug checks necessary for employment. Last year, Workaway sought to fill 846 jobs. After advertising for the positions, we received just 189 resumes. Only 70 individuals showed up for their scheduled interviews; 40 of them were offered positions; 15 accepted; five of those 15

failed their police background checks; 10 started work. A mere six finished the season. This is a problem.

Workaway and the clubs work hard to attract and retain U.S. workers. Whether it's on-site day care centers or referral bonuses of up to \$200 for U.S. workers who successfully recruit other American citizens, we're constantly trying new ways to attract American workers to fill the jobs in these clubs.

Workaway and the clubs in this area are committed to our community. We've partnered with the Workforce Alliance to get out the word to Americans so they apply for these jobs. Unfortunately, many unemployed Americans would prefer not to take seasonal jobs as waiters and dishwashers despite the average pay of \$10 an hour. In our region, many job lookers worked in construction or other fields and they would rather find jobs in their area of expertise than switch to temporary restaurant work.

We need motivated, drug free workers, able to pass police background checks, for restaurant jobs at competitive wages. We'd like to fill every job with an American. But if we are unable to do so, we must hire from abroad; if we don't have a reliable source of workers the Palm Beach County economy will suffer. In fact, if the clubs are unable to fill vital positions, they will be forced to close restaurants and curtail or diminish the services we provide for residents and guests. If we have to cut back, everyone gets hurt, including the many Americans who hold full-time jobs at our clubs.

These clubs have a big impact on the south Florida economy, providing local jobs for area small businesses like construction crews, food providers, florists, and more. They are home to 27,600 residents and members who shop in area stores and eat at local restaurants. They choose Palm Beach County because of our weather and world class services. We don't want these residents to drive real estate values any lower by selling their homes and moving to other sunny climates in Florida or elsewhere. We want them here in Palm Beach County, where the service is great and the welcome is warm.

Workaway and our club clients believe in doing the right thing for our workers – foreign and domestic. By doing so, we're part of what makes Palm Beach County work.

Bill Mayville is President and CEO of Workaway International. He was a member of Workforce Florida from 2000-2004.