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Visa workers may be in short supply in East End this summer



George Giannaris, owner of Hellenic Snack Bar & Restaurant in East Marion, talked on Sunday about his fears for his restaurant's future. He has relied on employees coming from overseas on student visas and that program might be canceled now due to the coronavirus pandemic. Credit: Randee Daddona

By Keldy Ortiz

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Hotels and restaurants on the East End that bring in J-1 visa workers to work during the summer may not be able to do so because the COVID-19 pandemic has hampered travel in and out of the United States, some business owners say.

The J-1 Exchange Visitor Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and allows people living outside the country, mostly college students, to work and experience living in the United States for a short period of time.

The exchange program is not suspended, but the Department of State advised on its website on Friday that “exchange visitors not take positions U.S. workers might fill ...” and sponsors should protect “the health, safety and welfare of both of participants and the Americans with whom they may interact” with.

George Giannaris , owner of Hellenic Snack Bar & Restaurant in East Marion, said in addition to hiring people locally, he typically brings in nearly a dozen J-1 visa holders to help. He acknowledged tourism could be in jeopardy with restaurants only offering takeout and local attractions such as wineries shut down. Giannaris said even if J-1 workers are able to travel to the country, lodging for them would not be easy as they usually live three or four in a room.

“If they were to come and get sick, I would have to shut down my restaurant and then provide a place where they could be away from the other students so the others wouldn’t get sick,” said Giannaris, who usually rents a house to J-1 employees. “Unless there was a huge change in the curve, and it flattened out immensely, it would be a terrible decision to have foreign students away from their homes, young men and women, come to this country in the middle of an epidemic.”

George Giannaris is the chef and owner at Hellenic Snack Bar and Restaurant in East Marion. Credit: Randee Daddona

Local businesses on the East End bring in J-1 visa holders to work because finding seasonal help can be difficult because U.S. college students return to school before the summer season ends, said Janice Nessel, general manager at Montauk Manor hotel.

J-1 visitors are not just sought on the East End, as the exchange program provides potential job opportunities for about 300,000 visa holders who come to the United States from more than 200 countries, according to the state department.

Nessel said she has employed three to five J-1 visa holders every summer for the past 20 years. This summer will be different.

“It’s going to be a loss for the few that we have,” Nessel said. “These days, we have to make do.”

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