

Foreign workers, familiar woes

■ International students flood OC every summer, but they face annual dangers

By Jay Hodgkins
Staff Writer

OCEAN CITY — Town officials and volunteers alike both knew late May through early June would be the time when international students would flood the resort to claim their summer jobs. But despite all the planning, both groups admit many of the annual dangers those groups face were just too big to tame this year.

After the first big date, Anne Marie Conestabile—coordinator for the eight-church coalition International Student Outreach Program — said the South American, Asian and mostly Eastern European students traveling to America on J1 summer work visas would steadily trickle in until about June 14.

But as Conestabile rushes around working nearly 20-hour days to find homes, food and jobs for the often homeless, hungry and penniless new arrivals, the odds are stacked against her group and Ocean City's Seasonal Worker Task Force as they try to help.

Students will still cram into small living quarters in violation of health and fire codes; they will still struggle to get medical help if they get sick

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Virginia Biafore
Seasonal Worker Task Force

and many will go days eating almost nothing until their first paycheck.

Task force chairwoman Virginia Biafore said much of the problem evolves from shady travel programs that issue visas and then disappear despite the fact they are supposed to be significantly responsible for the visa holders and to landlords and employers.

In November, the task force will meet with the Ocean City Town Council, Homeland Security and the State Department with statistics on bad travel programs to find a way to make visa sponsors

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Anne Litz photo

International students gather in Ocean City with Anne Marie Conestabile, right, of St. Mary's Holy Savior Church's International Student Outreach Program.

■ It's an uphill climb in a strange, new land

By Jay Hodgkins
Staff Writer

OCEAN CITY — Margaret Szczepanska had flown for nearly a day from Warsaw to Zurich to New York City. She had taken a bus for more than six hours to Salisbury. With no bus, from there she took a 40-minute taxi ride to Ocean City.

At about 3 a.m. Saturday morning as America was enjoying sleeping off a long holiday weekend night, the Polish college student who was coming to work for the summer was stuck

at 8th Street, desperate and in need of help.

"I traveled by myself without any friends and I was very confused and nervous," said Szczepanska.

So she called her travel program local representative, Anne Marie Conestabile — also the volunteer coordinator for the International Student Outreach Program — and Conestabile drove out to take her to her 26th Street apartments.

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Still, after a short night's sleep and a travel around half the world, Szczepanska's work wasn't nearly done.

"There were many paper-works," Szczepanska said, explaining tasks required of her and every other international student coming to the resort with a J1 visa. "Then I had to go to Salisbury to the Social Security office."

Szczepanska then joined a group that went to start bank accounts to protect against chronic thefts among foreign workers seen in the past. By her third day, Szczepanska was already working her first shift at Castle in the Sand.

It can be a wild 72 hours for anyone, let alone for thousands of foreign summer workers who are in a land trying to speak their second — or third or fourth — language.

"The first time I called home it was terrible. I was crying," Szczepanska said.

But Conestabile said it's still better than what international students faced in past years when there was no one they could call at 3 a.m. when they arrived in town.

In fact, Ukrainians Liudmyla Gordiienko and Svetlana Furs said Conestabile took such good care of them they were never really that worried — receiving free food and a place to live with Internet and bicycles provided.

It's a far cry from the past when Conestabile said she saw frail travelers passing out from lack of food and heat exhaustion as they walked miles up and down Coastal Highway looking for homes and jobs.

But on her fourth day, Szczepanska said she was beginning to feel better.

"Yesterday I called my mother and boyfriend and I was calm," she said. "I started feeling OK because I've met people that can help me."

■ Reach Jay Hodgkins
at 410-213-9442 or
jhdgkins@smgpo.gannett.com.

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accountable.

But some problems are local, too. Biafore said that just this week she's discovered employers have been hiring ineligible foreign workers either by accident or with disregard to rules, effectively costing legitimate J1 workers their jobs.

"I've heard it's possible as many as 2,000 have been hired that aren't eligible," Biafore said. "I don't know what to do because a lot of those jobs were promised to J1 kids. Employers get anxious because they need somebody."

But the task force is fighting those kinds of problems with education. The town paid to send out hundreds of pamphlets

to employers explaining the rules for hiring legitimate J1 workers.

The town has also paid for thousands of pamphlets written in English, Polish and Russian that are made available the second new arrivals exit at the 3rd Street bus station. The literature explains what registrations international students must complete and list dozens of important phone numbers to help students throughout the summer.

Conestabile and ISOP are fighting a more intense ground war as the eight local churches have scheduled free meals multiple nights per week this summer, falling just short of their goal to have a free meal every day.

International students also quickly learn Conestabile is the go-to person to place them in jobs and homes as ISOP slated them for 1,800 jobs last year and found 894 rooms for them.

"This year, Conestabile has already put hundreds in homes and jobs, but said she'll have no clue how many total until the arrival rush ends.

Conestabile says the most dangerous problems can still exist and the town still needs to do more, but ISOP and the task force have made it much more difficult for the students to fall into a desperate situation.

■ Reach Jay Hodgkins
at 410-213-9442 or
jhdgkins@smgpo.gannett.com.