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LABOR DAY 2021

Worker shortage continues

Help wanted signs still up going into Labor Day

STEPHANIE JONES, DENNIS HINES, KARENA TSE

has been a seemingly endless row because of staff shortages. They of help wanted signs. Along with used to be open until bar close those signs, businesses have reduced hours and even temporarily closed. Going into Labor Day midnight on weekends. weekend, there doesn't appear to be any immediate end in sight to the problem.

At Lake Geneva's Potbelly, for part of August they closed their indoor area and posted a sign that they were only taking online orders only.

Down the street at Northsid-Throughout the summer, there ers, they have had to close early nearly every night. Now they close at 10 p.m. weeknights and to increase back to normal hours forget that," she said.

It's what they had to do because of staffing, said Kierstin Johnson, the bar manager.

summer opted to close on Tuesneva's Oakfire Pizza opted to close in time. on Wednesdays.

For several weeks in August, to 4 p.m.

Only recently were they able 10:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days per week and until 8 p.m. on Sundays. Besides staffing issues, Jimmy

Similarly, Mars Resort this had to temporarily close one day anymore and phone calls from in August because a shipment days due to staffing and Lake Ge- from Sysco couldn't be delivered

At the Bottle Shop, 617 Main St., Beth Tumas, said she feels Jimmy John's in downtown Lake fortunate because she hasn't been Geneva reduced hours to 11 a.m. hit as hard as others by the worker shortage. She doesn't take it for granted. "I'm blessed and I don't

other challenges like suppliers ery or pick-up, through Aug. 31. like Sysco calling and telling her Johns also had supply issues and they cannot supply her crackers

other suppliers indicated some wine prices are going up because of wildfires.

And it's not just restaurants facing challenges.

At Lilypots flower shop, 605 W. Main St. they had a sign posted on their door on Aug. 26 that stated, "due to limited staff and previously scheduled events we are However, she has been hit by fully booked for all orders, deliv-

Please see WORKER, Page A2



Indictment connected to fairgrounds

Company reportedly lied on visa applications, made false promises

STEPHANIE JONES

sjones@lakegenevanews.net Following an investigation at the Walworth County fairgrounds, a man from Honduras has been indicted for his involvement in a forced labor conspiracy related to the federal H-2B visa program.

Denis Leonel Rodriguez Oyula has been indicted on charges

PHOTO PROVIDED BY THOM HOOKE PHOTOGRAPHY

MEMBERS OF THE GLENN MILLER ORCHESTRA PERFORM

Members of the Glenn Miller Orchestra perform during the "A String of Pearls" Gala, Aug. 28 at the Riviera ballroom.

GENEVA LAKE LAW ENFORCEMENT

Additional funding for lake police

Request made after agency had to move headquarters

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The City of Lake Geneva will join in with other lakefront communities to contribute additional funding to the Geneva Lake Law Enforcement Agency.

Members of the Lake Geneva City Council unanimously approved, Aug. 23, to contribute an additional \$15,000 to the Geneva Lake Law Enforcement Agency said the agency is in need of the this year.

The Town of Linn, Village

of Williams Bay and Village of Fontana also recently approved to provide an additional \$15,000 to the law enforcement agency for this year.

The lakefront communities contribute about \$45,000 to the agency each year to help them pay the cost to patrol Geneva Lake.

Representatives from the Geneva Lake Law Enforcement \$15,000 from each community to help pay for staff wages and other expenses for the rest of 2021.

Commander Thomas Hausner additional funding because their lease at their Williams Bay office,



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS, REGIONAL NEWS

Agency requested the additional An officer with the Geneva Lake Law Enforcement Agency surveying the lake near the Williams Bay Municipal Pier.

> cation, 478 Lake St. in Fontana. Hausner said he is pleased the

7 E. Geneva St., was terminated lakefront communities agreed to earlier in the year, and they had provide the additional \$15,000 to move their office to a new lo- to the agency. He said it costed

Please see FUNDING, Page A2

of forced labor, bringing in and harboring aliens and attempt and conspiracy to commit mail fraud.

To help obtain workers at the fairgrounds, the fair contracted with a third-party company to help obtain employees through the worker visa program, said Walworth County Fair General Manager Larry Gaffey.

He said they trusted the company they were working with. "We are as much victims in this as anyone," Gaffey said when contacted Monday.

The fair is cooperating with federal agents on the investigation, Gaffey said, and he was told by federal agents not to provide the name of the company the fair had worked with.

According to a 45-page affidavit filed in federal court, since July 2021, the FBI, U.S. Department of State Diplomatic Security Service, Homeland Security and US. Department of Labor have been investigating management and staff of the Walworth County Agricultural Society "regarding various immigration and forced labor crimes committed in, around and in connection with the fairgrounds."

Bait and switch

According to the affidavit, the four men from Honduras who were working and living at the fairgrounds originally signed up

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Fairgrounds

From A1

to come to the United States to work for a landscaping company in Michigan.

However, upon entering the U.S. four workers were rerouted to Elkhorn to perform cleaning and concession work at the Walworth County fairgrounds. Two other workers, who they were with, were sent to work for a traveling fair in Kane County, Illinois.

The men were told as part of their employment they would be making \$15 per hour. But instead they made around \$9.

When filling out paperwork, the workers reported they tried to put the Walworth County fairgrounds down as where they were working, but they were told not to use that address.

And instead of doing the landscaping work they were promised, their jobs were to pick up garbage, repair tables, clean animal manure, fumigate weeds and work Honduras. in food stalls.

workers lived on the fairgrounds in a trailer in a room with bunk beds and were told they couldn't use the bathroom in the trailer. Rather and shower trailer.

They were also monitored closely and felt they couldn't leave the fairgrounds and were watched even when they went to the grocerv store.

One weekend, they reportedly asked to travel to Chicago to see fore, according to the report. the city. But they were told they couldn't leave because they had to work.

"They sat waiting in their trailer all weekend, but they were never asked to work," the affidavit stated

This was just one of the occurrences where they didn't believe they were free to leave.

day he was ill, but he was told if working at an Alaskan fishery.



Patrons line up for Ribfest on Thursday, July 15 at Walworth County Fairgrounds in Elkhorn. That day, after getting a tip about the forced labor, undercover law enforcement went to the fairgrounds as part of their investigation.

he didn't work he could return to About H-2 visa fraud

According to the reports, the While working at the fair, the workers were often threatened of Labor who was part of the inwith deportation, including when vestigation, said in an affidavit one worker had to leave his post to go to the bathroom one day.

Also, when the workers arrived they had to use a public restroom they received their COVID vaccine and had side effects the day after, but they were told they had to still work.

> The workers' direct supervisor was Rodriguez Oyuela, who had come over to the U.S. from Honduras on a work visa the year be-

In 2020, the Walworth County Fair had petitioned to have six visa workers come to the fairgrounds petitioners or their agents take to work. Among them was Rodriguez Oyuela. However, no petition to have workers at the fairground was filed in 2021 and according to his affidavit, Rodriguez Oyuela's petition to work at the fairgrounds in the affidavit. expired on September 30, 2020 One of the workers said one and he was only authorized to be from Honduras contacted a gov-

Brooks Abramson, a special agent with the U.S. Department that it's not uncommon for guest workers who are part of the H-2B visa program to be threatened with deportation.

The H-2B nonimmigrant visa program allows foreign workers to perform temporary work in the U.S. for a maximum of three years. The prospective employees are only authorized to work for the sponsoring U.S. employer, who brought them over and that can create issues.

"When unscrupulous U.S. advantage of this power imbalance, foreign guest workers can be subjected to exploitative labor conditions that are different than first promised," Abramson wrote

In July, several of the workers

the investigation began.

KARENA TSE, KTSE@LAKEGENEVANEWS.NET

Who are they

The four workers are the Walworth County Fair described the situations that led them to America. They were hoping for an opportunity to make more money than they could at home and even That's not how we do business. possibly a path to citizenship.

man, married with children, who grew up in an impoverished area of Honduras. He saved limited money and asked his family for assistance and took out loans to go to school to study electrical engineering. He earned about \$800 monthly. But when the pandemic slowed business, he attended a job fair to come to America to earn more.

■ The second was a 30-year old Honduran man who sought work in the U.S. to support his mother and sister and wanted a reprieve from the frequent assaults and ernment agency to ask for help violent episodes he experienced the foreign workers."

in Honduras.

■ The third was a 22-year-old from the poor part of the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, who pursued post-secondary marketing education. He was the breadwinner for the family and his mother and multiple siblings had enough money to survive. But in Honduras, the man could only earn around \$100-\$200 per week and he wanted the opportunity to earn more.

■ The fourth was a 23-year-old from Honduras, who sought work in the U.S. to support his mother and two brothers. As the eldest son, he grew up performing grueling agricultural work to support his family. At age 13, he started training to be a fisherman. But after unsuccessful attempts to work in the fishing industry, he pursued a chance for a U.S. work visa. He even borrowed \$900 from friends to pay the fee for his paperwork and travel.

Gaffey said in an emailed statement, "We are frustrated that with their situation. From there international workers brought to work at the fairgrounds were victims of what may best be described as a bait-and-switch."

> "We are also angry that a consultant we engaged to make sure everything was done legally and correctly appears to have at least sidestepped rules and cut corners.

"We have never misrepresented ■ One was a 39-year-old the kind of work we need done, the pay we can afford or the accommodations we offer. And, to be clear, the prevailing wage offered to foreign workers is governed by U.S. law to protect American workers. We voluntarily agreed to exceed the prevailing wage when we heard the workers had been promised a different compensation. But we cannot change the nature of the work."

Gaffey added, "It is now clear that the information we continually shared with our consultant did not get to appropriate parties - either the federal government or

Funding

From A1

about \$186,000 to move into and remodel the Fontana facility.

"It was necessary because of the the office," Hausner said. "So our budget ran short for the first time in the 16 years I've run the department. This is the first time I've had to ask for additional funding."

Department of Natural Resources forcement statistics." reimburses the municipalities up to 75% of the funding they con-

Alderwoman Cindy Flower made a motion that the city contribute an additional \$12,000 instead of the additional \$15,000, because that is a closer amount to the percentage of time that the agency seems to patrol the City remodel and what took place with of Lake Geneva compared to the other communities.

"Maybe that would encourage them to ticket more down here," Flower said. "Maybe it would encourage them to get here more, Hausner said the Wisconsin and we could do it more on en-

> Flower's motion failed due to a lack of a second motion.

Worker

From A1

Problem across county

Staffing shortages are affecting communities across Walworth Country.

Executive Director of the Whitewater Chamber of Commerce Kellie Carper said she has also seen how a loss of workers manufacturing industries.

Many Whitewater restaushortened hours or closing for an "help wanted" signs. extra day during the week. Local businesses were already hanpandemic accelerated the process. some day soon, for sure." Staffing shortages cause unique problems depending on the industry, Carper said. While limited staff may force restaurants and bars to shorten their hours, delays in production. She said Generac Power Systems and Lavelle industries, two large manufacturers in Whitewater have been hosting hiring events in an effort to build staff.

businesses post signs that say "closed today" or "open tomorrow," but is not certain whether that is related to a staffing shortage.

"Sometimes I think we make the assumption that potentially it is a staffing issue, and we are, of course, understanding and grateful for the people who do show up," Simms said. "I don't know what is going on behind it, has impacted hospitality and but we certainly hope it's going to improve all together."

Simms said she also has seen

businesses offered signing bonuses and increased hourly pay to help attract employees.

"Right now with summer winding down, honestly I have not heard of any incentives that are continuing to be offered, but that doesn't mean they're not," Connelly said.

Job fair scheduled

To help people find jobs, a job fair is scheduled for Wednesday, Sept. 22 from 1-4 p.m. at Lake Lawn Resort at 2400 Geneva St., rants and bars are operating with multiple businesses posting in Delavan. It's hosted by the Lake Geneva Regional News, South-"I have not had someone come eastern Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, and Equus Workforce Solutions.

tribute to the agency each year.

The communities usually are reimbursed about \$25,000, but last year they were reimbursed about \$31,000.

Members of the Lake Geneva City Council unanimously approved to use the additional \$6,500 and money from the city's lakefront fund to contribute the additional \$15,000 to the Geneva attending to." Lake Law Enforcement Agency.

During the city council meeting, Alderman Richard Hedlund said he is in favor of contributing the additional funding but would like the agency to patrol Lake Geneva's area of the lake more often.

The agency presented recent statistics to city officials which indicates that patrol officers have issued 22 citations and 12 warnings in the City of Lake Geneva; 38 citations and 15 warnings in the Town of Linn; 38 citations and eight warnings in the Village of Williams Bay; and summer.

"Williams Bay to have as many is much more shoreline, we're not getting our fair share," Hedlund up this fall. To me, this is ludicrous."

Mayor Charlene Klein said the agency patrols areas of the lake based on need and where emergencies and incidents occur.

"That's very unpredictable on how often they are at this end and how often they are at that end," Klein said. "There could be a year where there is a lot of things going on down here that they would be

Alderman Tim Dunn said by providing additional funding to the agency maybe they would be able to hire more staff to improve enforcement on the lake.

"I don't know how we can improve service if we cut their budget or restrict their budget," Dunn said. "One reason we're not getting enough service on the lake is because they don't have enough money. I think we have to help them out."

During the Aug. 17 finance, licensing and regulation committee meeting, Hausner told the 29 citations and 17 warnings in aldermen that his officers patrol the Village of Fontana so far this the area of Lake Geneva as often as possible.

"I know we're writing citations tickets as the Town of Linn, which and making enforcement actions in the city's area," Hausner said. "I know my boats patrol the entire said. "I will bring that up again lake. Usually, we're down by the when their budget request comes city at least twice or three times a shift depending on the nature of the calls."

The worker shortage is a complicated problem with complicated solutions, Carper said. But she is optimistic.

"I think that as with any challenge that the country has faced over the last few decades, we are resilient," she said.

Annette Simms, executive di-Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, said several of the chamber's partner businesses have reemployees; however, other busiseem to be ready to return to the workforce.

"I feel like it could go either way," she said.

up to me and say, 'I have 10 applidling staffing shortages prior to cants, and we are all full," Simms COVID-19, Carper said, but the said. "I'm hoping to hear that

Finding solutions

Simms said most business owners seem to be focused on Job Seeker Preparation finding a solution to their staffmanufacturers may experience ing shortage rather than blaming a particular reason for why they are having difficulties finding If you need help updating your employees.

She said some businesses have increased their pay to help retain employees.

"I can appreciate that focus," Simms said. "You have to keep moving forward and find a way. I feel like businesses are doing everything they can without playing the blame game."

Becke Connelly, executive director for the Geneva Lake West Chamber of Commerce, said she rector for the Delavan-Delavan also has talked to several business owners who have said they have had difficulty finding employees.

"It's across the board," Conported having difficulties finding nelly said. "Hospitality seems to be impacted the hardest, but ness owners have said that people banks and financial institutions in before the event are also struggling to find hourly employees to fill positions as tellers and in customer service."

Connelly said, during the be-Simms said she has seen some ginning of the summer, several tain Banquet Hall in Sturtevant.

To sign-up to have a booth at the Job Fair, call Nick Iacona at 262-631-1790 or email nick. iacona@lee.net.

Tips:

Bring copies of your resume. resume, visit the Employment Resource Center at one of the workforce locations: Racine: 1717 Taylor Ave – Burlington: 1072 Milwaukee Ave – Kenosha: 8600 Sheridan Road

Dress for the job fair like you would for an interview.

Be prepared to answer questions about yourself.

■ Show up with a great attitude.

■ Do your research-know what companies will be there and learn something about the companies you are interested in working for before attending.

■ If possible, apply online to the companies you are interested

Additional Upcoming Fairs are scheduled for Wednesday, Oct. 13 at Parkway Chateau in Kenosha and Wednesday, Oct. 20 at Foun-

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