

HIRE LEARNING

Looking abroad to fill job positions

By Robert Miller

Danbury Hospital is a community hospital, tending to heart attacks, appendectomies and babies' earaches. But it is also a teaching hospital, and in some specialties there just aren't enough young doctors available for residency programs, officials say.

"There are very specific specialties — for example, primary care — where this is happening," said Andrea Rynn, spokeswoman for Western Connecticut Health Network, which manages Danbury and New Milford hospitals.

In those cases, the hospital has gone abroad to bring qualified young doctors to the United States.

To bring them to Danbury, the hospital uses a federal program called H-1B, which allows a variety of U.S. companies and non-profit institutions to bring into the country foreign professionals, largely in what are called STEM professions — science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The workers are granted visas that allow them to work in the United States for three to six years.

The program illuminates the complexity of the immigration debate in America. Companies are saying they simply can't find home-grown workers with the skills to do the tasks essential to their operations.

The program is not without its critics, who say it is being abused.

Of one thing there is no doubt: The visa program is wildly popular with employers.

"To ask if it's needed is redundant," said Tarek Sobh, vice president for graduate studies and research at the University of Bridgeport, which has used H-1B to fill faculty positions. "We have no other options."

RELYING ON FOREIGN WORKERS

A recent report by the Brookings Institution concluded that the Bridgeport/Stamford/Norwalk metropolitan area is one of the most active places in the country in recruiting H-1B workers. In 2010-11, Fairfield County was eighth in the U.S. in the number of H-1B employees total with jobs, with an average of 2,328 of these jobs over those two years.

A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Labor said that in 2010, companies and institutions in Connecticut requested 13,746 H-1B jobs and were granted permission to use the visa program for about 12,000.

This year, companies had to move fast to secure H-1B jobs. The U.S. begins

accepting employees for the visas in April of each year. This year, all 85,000 spots were filled by mid-June.

Hartford-based attorney Brenda Eckert, a partner in the firm of Shipman & Goodwin — who has worked on H-1B applications — said that in the two previous years it took many months for those spots to fill up.

"It's a sign of an improving economy," Eckert said of the quick filling of the slots.

Employers use H-1B visas to

A WAY TO SAVE MONEY?

The visa program has vociferous critics. Norman Matloff, a professor of computer science at the University of California at Davis, said the program is being abused by employers who can hire young, relatively cheap workers from other countries.

Matloff said, "If you say to these companies, 'What would happen if you offered a salary that is significantly higher?' they all say, 'We can't offer that.' It's a way to save money."

Matloff buttresses his claims with a 2011 report by the Government Accountability Office. It found that a great number of H-1B applications are being filed by a small number of companies; that there is no tracking system to follow these workers in the U.S.; and that oversight of the programs is "fragmented and restricted."

The GAO report also found that in one field — computer-related occupations — there were "significant" differences in wages between H-1B employees and their American counterparts.

A VARIETY OF JOBS

Not all the employees recruited through the program are in high-tech jobs.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport has used the H-1B program to bring both clergy and hospital chaplains to the area.

Brian Wallace, spokesman for the diocese, said this, in part, reflects the worldwide organization of the Roman Catholic Church and its willingness to bring foreign priests here to study.

Wallace also said that ethnic groups who have emigrated to the U.S. may dominate some parishes.

"Local priests may not speak the language, or have an understanding of the culture of the people," Wallace said.

'A SYSTEMIC FAILURE'

The Brookings report faulted the federal government because it was not giving the H-1B fee money back to the places that were hiring the most foreign workers.

However, The WorkPlace Inc., in Bridgeport has been an exception to that finding, said Neil Ruiz, who co-authored the think tank's report.

The WorkPlace has

received a \$5 million, five-year grant from the H-1B program to train laid-off people for jobs in the medical field. It will train 300 workers a year.

"We're doing a lot of recruiting," said Adrienne Parkmond, WorkPlace executive vice president. "In an area like Fairfield County, where the people are older, we're going to need them."

Sobh, of U.B., said that until the United States changes the direction of its educational system, it will need temporary work visa programs for many high-skill jobs.

"The United States graduates 60,000 to 70,000 students with a bachelor's degree in engineering a year," Sobh said. "We graduated 6,000 Ph.D.s in engineering a year. Of those, 50 to 60 percent are students who are foreign-born."

To remedy this, he said, schools have to start bringing students into the fields of math and science early — at the elementary levels.

"It's been a failure in our education system for the last 20 years or more," Sobh said.

fill jobs in certain skill areas