

New Approach to Housing Sees Light

In an attempt to create new and comfortable housing for workers hired under the federal H-2A visa program, one citrus grower in Florida is paving the way for others to follow.

Tri-Ben Groves, a Central Florida citrus harvester, wants to build their own housing for their migrant workers. “The plan is ‘kind of on the cutting edge of what’s going to be the norm here,’ said Fran Becker, vice president of Peace River Citrus Products, Inc.”¹

Located in Polk County, the plan is to construct three dormitories for the workers. They must meet strict federal, as well as state regulations for housing. It is a very real effort by a Florida citrus business to adopt the H-2A program, and is viewed as vital to meet the demand for manpower, yet avoid prosecution for hiring illegal aliens as harvesters.

As the *Orlando Sentinel* reports, not everyone in the area is happy with the proposed venture:

“While the agriculture community has rallied to support the project, more than 400 people—many of whom don’t live anywhere near the rural location—signed a petition against it. Countless residents also spoke against the plans at a planning-commission meeting last fall—among the most-attended in recent memory.”²

However, in all fairness, almost none of the residents of the country are acquainted with the H-2A program or the type of workers that it draws to a community, as it represents a tiny fraction of the total immigrant population in this country and is under-utilized—especially in Florida.

Bo Bentley, a manager of the Winter Haven-based Bentley Brothers citrus company, of which Tri-Ben is a subsidiary, is quoted as telling the *Orlando* newspaper,

“Background checks are conducted on all workers before they're hired. If workers violate laws or employer policies -- such as no alcohol or loud music in the dorms -- they are sent back to their country and not allowed to return to the United States for 10 years...These guys are here to work. These aren't criminals. They're not thugs,' he said.”³

The problem is that long-time Florida residents are used to the itinerant-type of workers that have drifted from its southern base to the northern U.S. on annual migrations and hauled mobile homes and trailers around, sleeping in cars and trucks, instead of settling into permanent housing. Along with their semi-permanence in the past have come higher crime rates in unsettled areas and subsequent clashes with residents.

But, this new style of housing, based on company property, maintained and overseen by corporate managers represents a new style for the future migrant worker. There are even amenities unknown to farm laborers in the past.

“Bentley said they’ll provide on-site recreation and cleaning services. ‘It’s so new, it’s completely different,’ Bentley said.”⁴

These citrus harvesters deserve a chance to engage in this new endeavor and be given a chance to exercise their option in the federal program set up to provide legal, experienced workers for them. As Andrew Meadows, spokesman for grower group Florida Citrus Mutual stated, “We think that Polk County can really shape some policy that maybe other counties can pick up as well.”⁵

NOTE

(H-2AUSA offers turnkey H-2A management, including housing! We support this Florida company in their efforts and are looking at a similar project of our own. Contact us at Phone: 901-398-2911 or e-mail us at info@h2ausa.com with your inquiries.)

¹⁻⁶Amy L. Edwards, “*Polk County residents buck housing plan for migrant workers*,” January 8, 2008. Orlando Sentinel.com, at: <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/business/orl-migrants0808jan08.0,425671.print.story>. (accessed 1-8-2008)