

A conversation with Sarah Williamson, September 9, 2016

Participants

- Sarah Williamson – Executive Director, Protect the People (PTP)
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Sarah Williamson.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Ms. Williamson of PTP for an update on an Open Philanthropy Project grant to support the organization's Haitian seasonal migration program. The \$550,000 grant was awarded in February 2016 as part of the Open Philanthropy Project's work on immigration policy. Conversation topics included an update on the status of the program and a discussion of the successes, challenges, and lessons learned from the program to date.

Current status of the program

Workers currently in the U.S.

A total of 58 workers worked in the U.S. as part of the Haiti H-2A program in 2016. (Update: By November 13, 2016, all 58 had returned to Haiti to give back to their communities. PTP was pleased to report this 100% return rate to the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince.)

Workers requested for later this year

One employer tentatively requested 50 people to start work in the U.S. in November. This request was withdrawn, as the client for the employer preferred to hire workers from Jamaica.

Workers for 2017

PTP has received requests for 151 workers for next year. However, based on its experience in 2016, the actual number of workers who come to the U.S. is likely to be lower.

Successes

More workers obtaining visas

About 50 workers – many of whom were denied H-2A visas last year – successfully received visas in June and came to the U.S. in July. PTP was able to achieve this through a more rigorous training process for program candidates.

Interest from U.S. employers

There is a large need for workers in the U.S. agricultural industry that this program and others like it can help fill. Interest in the Haiti program is especially strong among employers who are new to the H-2A process. Many of these businesses have a diverse staff, work with resettlement agencies and asylum seekers, and are open to more diversity in their workforce.

Large worker requests for 2016

In 2016, two employers requested a large number of workers from the Haiti program:

- Employer #1 requested 100 workers, who were scheduled to work from November 2016 to May 2017.
- Employer #2 requested 80 workers, who were scheduled to work from September 2016 to May 2017.

Cultivate'16

At the Cultivate'16 agricultural trade show in July, PTP gave a presentation on the Haiti program during the *Greenhouse Grower's Top 100 Growers Breakfast*. As a result, 47 new employers approached PTP with requests for specific numbers of workers for the end of 2016 and spring of 2017.

Payroll for workers

The estimated total salary that the 2016 program participants will receive for their work in the U.S. is approximately \$667,880. This is more than the investment that the Open Philanthropy Project made in the program so far this year.

Challenges

Employers encountering regulatory obstacles

There are currently 112 workers in Haiti who were selected to participate in the program and were slated to work for Employer #1 and Employer #2, mentioned above. However, the employers encountered regulatory obstacles that prevented the workers from coming to the U.S.:

- Employer #1 was familiar with the process of acquiring H-2A visas, already had a large labor force, and was interested in expanding it. The employer needed to build additional housing for the new workers, but the housing permit was denied by the state.
- PTP worked with trusted collaborators in the states where Employer #2 operates, to ensure that there was a plan for housing the workers and passing other state-level regulatory checks. Employer #2 was granted permission to proceed by the state, and PTP began training the workers for interviews at the embassy. However, the U.S. Department of Labor denied Employer #2's request for visas because the employer did not have adequate audit reporting.

The H-2A visa process

The process of hiring workers on an H-2A visa is complex for employers who are new to it. This process is one of the main reasons for the high employer drop-off rate in the Haiti program. Of the 47 employers who initially requested workers after Cultivate'16, only six are still interested in participating in the program. The remaining employers decided not to use the program due to concerns about the H-2A process, including:

- The Adverse Effect Wage Rate for H-2A visa holders, which is higher than minimum wage rates.
- Housing expenses and government regulations concerning the H-2A process as a whole.

Many employers would prefer a simpler process and would be more willing to participate in the program if it were easier to do so.

Assistance in the H-2A process

PTP has attempted to help employers through the H-2A process. In Virginia and Colorado, it also refers employers to Workforce Advantage, a business consulting agency focusing specifically on acquiring H-2A and H-2B visas. The agency understands the Haiti program and can speak to its benefits.

Since the creation of the Haiti program, PTP has approached other large, established agencies working in this space, but so far has been unable to find more agencies to assist. There were a variety of reasons for this, including:

- Lack of capacity to support any more visa applications or new clients.
- Initial reservations about working on a program focused on Haiti.
- Misunderstanding the purpose of the program.
- Lack of interest in working on humanitarian-oriented programs.

Need for additional employer support

Employers often require more assistance than an agency or PTP can currently offer. There is need for an entity that could offer pre-consultations to employers, help them make decisions about housing options and costs, and generally assist them through the early stages of the process.

Other lessons learned

Unexpected travel expenses

The workers were not experienced travelers, had complex multi-city itineraries from Haiti to the U.S., and were traveling on a limited visa. PTP staff had to accompany each small group of workers on their flights to ensure that they navigated the voyage successfully. This required thousands of dollars for airline tickets and a large number of PTP staff, which PTP had not initially budgeted for.

PTP is working with the employers to book less complex itineraries for the workers' return trips to Haiti, to avoid incurring this cost again.

Staffing at the state level

In the future, it may be more effective to hire a staff member in Florida, Oregon, and other key states that constantly need more agricultural labor, as opposed to sending program staff to those states when necessary. Members of the agricultural industry prefer to conduct business locally, face-to-face, so an on-site staff member would be able to build closer relationships with all of the employers in a given state.

Working with Haitian communities in the U.S.

There is potential for closer, more effective collaboration with reputable Haitian-American businesses, in order to enlist their help in the program.

Many Haitian-Americans have contacted PTP and offered to help. On a number of occasions, PTP staff travelled to Florida – which has a large population of Haitian-Americans working as contractors in the agricultural industry – to meet with individuals and understand who could be an effective partner in that community.

However, identifying viable partnerships in the Haitian-American business community has been challenging.

Measuring impact on communities in Haiti

This program has brought significant capital to the workers and their families, allowing them to buy land, send their children to school, and build a better life in Haiti. PTP stated that it is important to measure this positive impact on the lives of these individuals, who have returned to Haiti with new skills and the confidence to make a greater contribution to their communities in Haiti.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
<http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>*