

Seasonal Workforce Housing Study in Benzie and Leelanau Counties

Executive Summary, July 2020

Project Overview

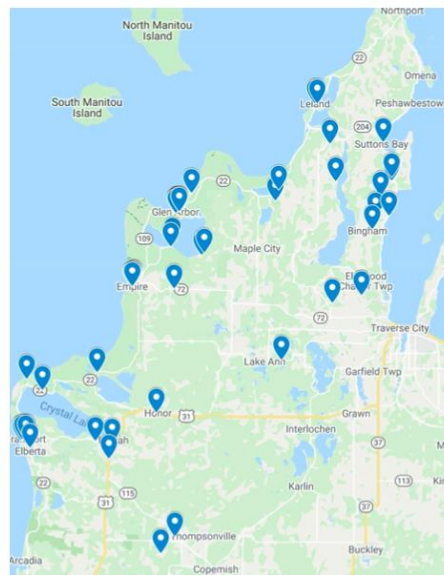
The Sleeping Bear Gateways Council (the “Council”) seeks to work with local communities, stakeholders, and the National Park Service in preserving the unique character and natural resources of the area for the benefit of its citizens, visitors, economy and environment. As such, the Council works to address the infrastructure needs of the villages and businesses within 60 miles of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. One of the unique challenges facing gateway communities in Leelanau and Benzie Counties is the lack of regional housing options for workers, especially during the summer season and autumn shoulder season. The Council, in partnership with Avenue ISR, set out to better measure the extent and the impact of the issue.

Industries of Focus

According to 2019 payroll data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, employers in several industries—food services and drinking places; retail trade; arts, entertainment and recreation; and accommodation—account for 62.4% of the seasonal workforce hiring in Benzie and Leelanau Counties. These industries are therefore the focus of this study.

Research Approach

Consultants conducted phone interviews and follow-up conversations with 15 business owners in the focus industries described above. Following these interviews, an online survey was made available to all businesses in Benzie and Leelanau Counties (the survey was advertised via local media, social media, and email campaign). Combined respondents representing 62 Benzie and Leelanau businesses participated in the survey; this participant pool employs nearly a third (31%) of year-round employees in hospitality, food service, retail trade, and entertainment in Benzie and Leelanau Counties.

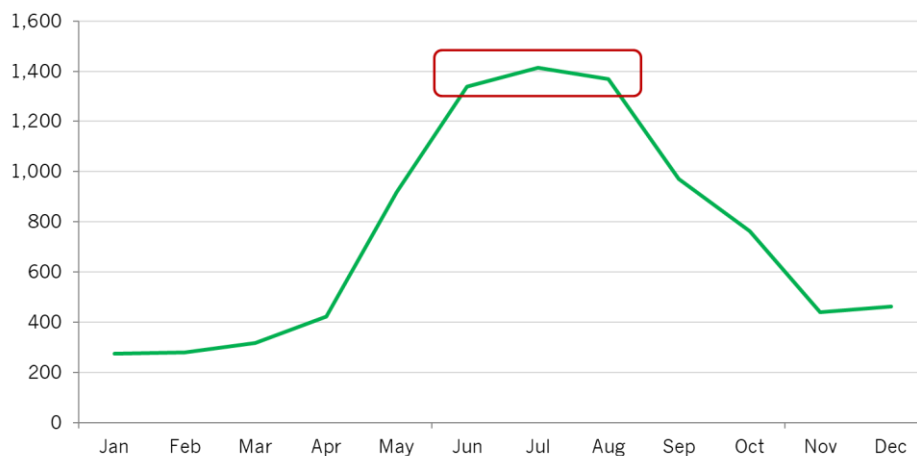


Geographic Distribution of Respondents (July 2, 2020)

Research Results

Hiring peaks in summer months. The largest number of seasonal workers are hired in June through August, though many employers ramp up considerably between May and October.

Number of Seasonal Workers Hired By Respondents (Estimated 31% of all Seasonal Workers)



Glen Arbor, Thompsonville, and Frankfort/Elberta experience the greatest need for seasonal employees.

Finding housing for seasonal workers is hard. More than 60% of survey respondents agree and nearly half (42%) strongly agree that finding housing for seasonal workers is difficult.

“The challenge is that unless you have a connection (family with second home, etc.) it is difficult to hire enough staff because they don't have a guaranteed place to live.”

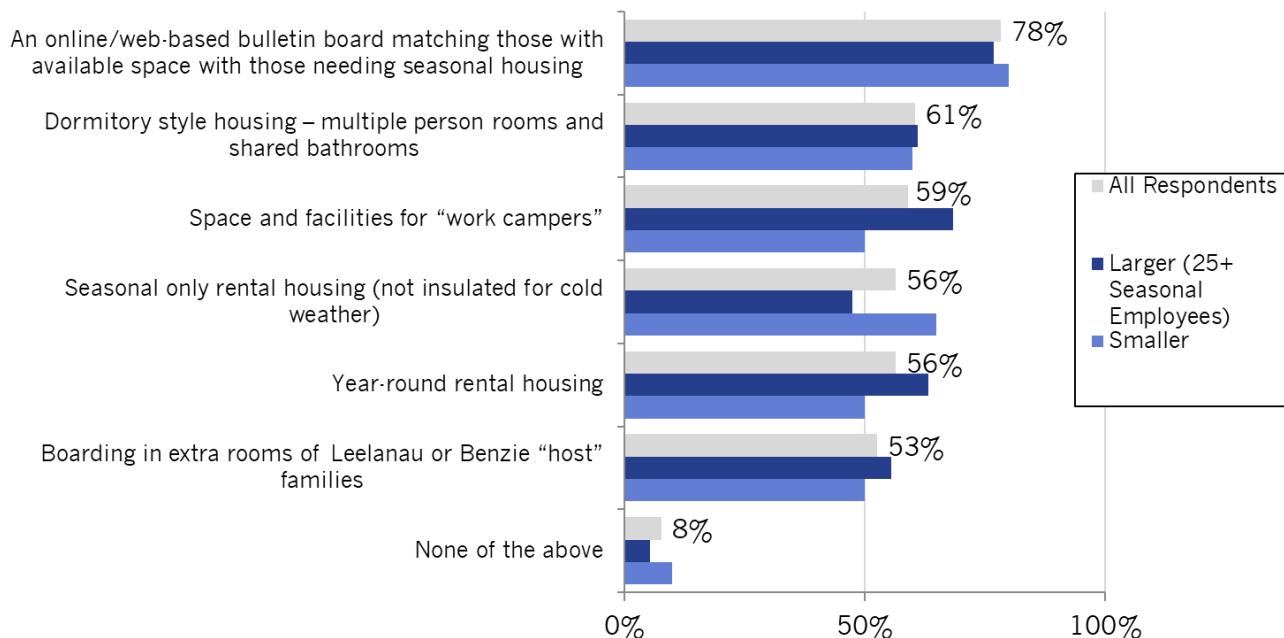
Large and small employers both struggle to find seasonal employee housing. Regardless of size, large (25+ employees) and small (25 employees or less) employers find it equally difficult to find enough employees to meet seasonal needs.

Employers and employees experience negative consequences without enough seasonal employee housing. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of large employers have been unable to fill open positions or have seen negative business impacts from employees needing to drive from far away where housing is available or working overtime to ensure adequate coverage.

“I aim for 80 employees and settle for 40 who then work double shifts much of the time.”

Employers frequently expend time and resources to help seasonal employees with housing needs. Nearly all (90%) of large employer respondents have provided some form of help to seasonal employees in finding housing and 65% have actually provided housing (at an average investment of \$2,500 per seasonal employee per year).

Businesses see the potential to develop seasonal housing solutions, including an online/web-based bulletin board, dormitory style housing, “work campers” facilities, seasonal and year-round rental housing, and boarding with host families. 92% of all business respondents support one or more of these solutions.



Question: Which of the following types of solutions do you think might work for your seasonal employees?

Transportation is also a key factor. Businesses recognize the opportunity and need to address regional transportation improvements while considering shared seasonal employee housing solutions, including expanded Benzie Bus and BATA service hours as well as partnerships to develop “park and ride” programs near where employees live.

Key Takeaways

- The businesses who hire the most seasonal workers in the warmer months tend to be restaurants, retail stores, entertainment companies and venues (e.g. golf courses, canoe liveries) and hotels/resorts.
- There is a considerable need for seasonal workforce housing in the gateway communities of Leelanau and Benzie Counties, especially in Glen Arbor, Thompsonville and Frankfort/Elberta and especially between May and October.
- The lack of housing causes negative impacts on businesses and on the customer experience for visitors and other customers, including local residents.
- Many businesses have invested time and money trying to address the difficulty their seasonal workers have finding housing. Those who are investing business resources are spending an average of \$2,500 per employee on housing solutions.
- There is a considerable appetite to learn more and/or to actively work with the Council developing solutions.
- This is a clear opportunity for the SBGC to address a significant challenge facing these gateway communities.

Next Steps

The Council is grateful to the Benzie and Leelanau employers who participated in this study and informed its results. If you would like more information on how the Council is proceeding with the next phase of this project, please contact Bill Witler at wrwitler@hotmail.com.