

Region relies heavily on visas

By Rob Varnon

The Stamford-Bridgeport region is home to major financial players, corporate giants and a heavy dependence upon getting work visas for foreign scientists and engineers, a new study found.

According to the Brookings Institution, the Bridgeport-Stamford metro area ranked eighth from 2010 to 2011 in the demand for temporary H-1B visas — three-year work permits provided to highly skilled foreign workers in fields where the native supply of labor is lacking.

Area business associations and college educators say the economy faces a problem because of the way the H-1B program works, leaving some companies wanting for workers and the workers wondering whether they are actually wanted in the U.S., since they are carrying the “temporary” label.

H-1B visas have been available since 1990, and for the last 10 years scientific, technical, engineering and mathematics fields — STEM — have dominated their use.

Brookings issued the report to spark a conversation about U.S. policies on H-1B and STEM skills in a global economy. It said other H-1B studies had not taken into account local markets.

“To move forward in the national debate about global economic competitiveness, policy makers must understand local demand for foreign skills in the United States,” said Neil Ruiz, Brookings’ senior policy analyst and report co-author. “Until now, the discussion around high-skilled immigrants and the H-1B visa program has been highly polarized, conducted solely at the national level, and lacking geographic information about employer demand.”

Brookings said it found that demand continues to exceed the supply of visas, indicating a potential problem for the nation’s economy, and it also found problems with the way money generated by fees companies pay for H-1Bs does not appear to be flowing to areas with the highest demand.

“Currently, H-1B visa fees are designed to support workforce technical skills training. Our research shows that these funds, however, are not distrib-

uted proportionally to the areas that have the highest demand for H-1B workers,” said Jill Wilson, Brookings’ senior research analyst and report co-author. “We must use the proceeds from this program strategically to ensure that tomorrow’s workforce has the right skills in the right places.”

High-demand metro areas only receive funds of about \$3 per worker, but low-demand metros receive about \$15 per worker, Brookings found. Bridgeport-Stamford, despite ranking high in usage and requests for H-1Bs ranked 40th in total dollars received.

Bridgeport-Stamford is one of the smaller metro regions in the study, which is why the 2,328 requests,

the 23rd highest overall for H-1Bs, propelled it to eighth place ranking for intensity, measured per 100,000 native workers. The Bridgeport-Stamford market had 5.67 requests per 100,000 workers.

New York had the highest number of requests in the nation at 59,921, followed by Los Angeles and San Francisco. Hartford ranked 31, with 1,761 requests, and New Haven was 47 with 955.

There is a cap on H-1B visas in the U.S., limiting the number of visas annually issued to major corporations to 65,000. Requests for new visas and renewals have far outpaced the cap almost every year in the past decade, with the exceptions coming in 2001 through 2003, following the bursting of the dot.com bubble and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The government upped the number of H-1Bs to 195,000 for those years.

Chris Bruhl, president and chief executive officer of Stamford-based Business Council of Fairfield County, said people working on H-1Bs are important to the economy.

“They allow companies to function and to therefore produce other jobs and profits,” he said, adding that the continued demand for H-1B workers is a result of the U.S. inability to produce talent to fill those jobs.

“As a nation, we chose not to bother to give incentives to generating STEM professionals,” Bruhl said.

The good news is that foreign professionals want these jobs, but Bruhl and Tarek Sobh, dean of the University of Bridgeport’s School of Engineering, both voiced concern over immigration and visa policies, as well as improving our education system.

Bruhl said the H-1B process must reflect the fact that the nation isn’t going to address its gap in creating new engineers and other professionals over night.

Sobh said the H-1B program is proving to be a disadvantage to American businesses who are competing for these engineers and other professionals, many of whom are educated in America.

“How can you live your life, when you don’t think you’re job can be permanent?” Sobh said.

Students used to come from India, earn their degrees and stay. Now, he said, they’re going back to India or landing jobs in places like Dubai and Kuwait, where they’re earning the same salaries, but without the taxes and without the complications of a temporary visa.

For those who graduate and want to stay in America and build a life and career, Sobh said, the process can take about 22 years to become a citizen — counting the time foreign students enter their freshman year in college, earn a master’s degree, then spend roughly 13 years working under temporary visas and green cards.

Brookings said it hopes the report and people like Sobh and Bruhl will push for more discussion on the matter.

Problems seen

with H-1B visa program