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Migration Policy Expert Welcomes U.S. Decision to Include Haiti in Temporary Worker Program

Earnings Could Top U.S. Aid for Earthquake Reconstruction

WASHINGTON, D.C. (January 20, 2012) — The U.S. decision this week to include Haiti in the list of countries eligible for America’s largest temporary employment visa program opens the way for impoverished Haitians to earn more over the next ten years than the entire U.S. earthquake reconstruction aid package—at zero cost to the U.S. government and no increase in overall U.S. immigration, according to a migration policy scholar at the Center for Global Development (CGD).

CGD senior fellow Michael Clemens, who led a CGD effort to get Haiti added to the list of countries eligible for H-2 temporary worker visas, said that if just 2% of the roughly 100,000 H-2 visas issued each year go to Haitians, over ten years Haitians working in the U.S. would earn about \$400 million, most of which would be sent home as remittances. That’s equal to all U.S. aid for Haiti earthquake reconstruction, but most of that money goes to U.S. contractors.

On Wednesday Haitian president Michel Martelly publicly expressed his appreciation to the U.S. government and the American people for Haiti’s inclusion on the H-2 visa list in a posting on his Facebook page.

The H-2 visa program enables U.S. employers to hire low-skill foreign workers for seasonal and other temporary work in the agriculture and service sectors. By law employers cannot hire H-2 workers unless they have tried and failed to find an American to fill the position. The average income for such workers is about \$20,000 per year. The H-2 eligibility list is updated annually. There are 58 countries on the 2012 list released this week. Haiti was included for the first time.

“I am absolutely thrilled with this week’s announcement that Haiti has been added to the H-2 visa eligibility list,” says Clemens. “Small changes in migration policy are one of the most effective and cheapest ways for Americans to help Haitians still suffering from the effects of the earthquake. This is a win-win for Americans and Haitians. Once people learned of Haiti’s exclusion and its consequences, there was widespread support for inclusion.”

Clemens said that the U.S. decision is the first time in at least a half-century that such a well-timed change in admission policy offers the opportunity to greatly and inexpensively enhance the disaster recovery efforts with increased international mobility.

“Michael has brought rigor and passion to his research on the unsung benefits of emigration for sending countries. This change is the direct result of savvy engagement in the policy process by him and those he recruited to assist him,” says CGD president Nancy Birdsall. “It’s a perfect example of the huge benefits that can be obtained from smart policies, and of the ideas-to-action approach that we foster here at the Center for Global Development.”

Over the past six months, Clemens worked with Sarah Williamson and Royce Murray, experts respectively in humanitarian relief and immigration law, to organize dozens of meetings at the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, the White House, and on Capitol Hill, as well as with the humanitarian aid community, the refugee community, and the Haiti advocacy groups.

They travelled to Miami and even Geneva seeking politically viable ways to increase Haitians’ opportunities to work abroad. Almost no one Clemens spoke with was even aware of Haiti’s exclusion from the H-2 visa list.

Along the way the cause garnered rare bi-partisan support—including 8 Florida senators and representatives from both parties—and endorsements from religious and civic groups and publications such as the *Washington Post* and *Miami Herald*. But it also sparked fierce criticism from anti-immigration groups (and plenty of vitriol from white supremacist blogs). Clemens tells this story in a [blog posted this week](#) on the CGD Website.

After months of active policy engagement by Clemens and his team, the [new list](#) of eligible H-2 visa countries was released on Wednesday by the Department of Homeland Security, and made available in the *Federal Register*.

H-2 visa eligibility could have huge impacts for Haitians: The typical Haitian male working in the United States earns at least six times the real income he could in Haiti, much of which is then used to support families back home.

The change has zero cost for the U.S. government and will not substantially alter the total number of temporary workers in the United States. It merely makes Haitians eligible to be part of a pool whose size is determined by U.S. employers’ demand. H-2 visas are nonimmigrant visas—that is, they do not allow for permanent residency.

“This smart move by the U.S. government is a true cause for celebration. It was the right thing to do, on humanitarian, moral, economic, and fiscal grounds. We are proud of the role we played in achieving this outcome and so very grateful to the numerous governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations that helped to make it happen,” says Clemens.

Notes for Editors:

**Members of the media interested in speaking with Michael Clemens should contact media relations coordinator Jessica Brinton at Jbrinton@cgdev.org or contact her by phone at (202) 416-4040.*

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