DECISION AND ORDER AFFIRMING DENIAL OF CERTIFICATION

This matter arises under the temporary non-agricultural employment provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act ("INA," or "the Act"), 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(15)(H)(ii), and the implementing regulations set forth at 20 C.F.R. Part 655, Subpart A.1 The H-2B program permits employers to hire foreign workers to perform temporary, non-agricultural work within the United States "if unemployed persons capable of performing such service or labor cannot be found in [the United States]." 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(15)(H)(ii)(b). Employers who seek to hire foreign workers through the H-2B program must apply for and receive a "labor certification" from the United States Department of Labor ("DOL" or the "Department"), Employment and Training Administration ("ETA"). 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(h)(6)(iii). For the reasons set forth below, the Certifying Officer’s ("CO") denial of temporary labor certification is affirmed.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

H-2B Application


1 On April 29, 2015, the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) jointly published an Interim Final Rule to replace the regulations at 20 C.F.R. Part 655, Subpart A. See 80 Fed. Reg. 24042, 24109 (Apr. 29, 2015) ("2015 IFR"). The 2015 IFR applies if an employer filed its temporary labor certification application after April 29, 2015 and requested a start date after October 1, 2015. In the present case, Employer filed its temporary labor certification application after April 29, 2015, requesting a start date of need after October 1, 2015. Thus, the 2015 IFR applies.
Employers requested one household cook from June 26, 2016 to June 25, 2019. (Id.) The job listed the following requirement: “must have knowledge of Italian (is required) to enable learning and application of rare specialty Italian and Mediterranean recipes.” (AF 196.)

Employers listed the nature of the temporary need as a “one-time occurrence.” (AF 190.) They explained that their need is a “one-time occurrence” because “such an employee has never been needed before” and “it is uncertain as to the degree of need, nor the time for it.” (AF 196.) Employers wrote that this position requires a three-year commitment because their children are young. (Id.) Employers attached their tax returns to the application, stating that the tax returns “suffice to show the nature of the employers’ other businesses, and therefore the need for the one worker’s position.” (Id.)

Notice of Deficiency

On June 6, 2016, the CO issued a Notice of Deficiency (“NOD”), notifying Employers that their application failed to meet the acceptance criteria in light of three deficiencies. (AF 176-181.) Employers cured one of the three deficiencies, leaving two deficiencies at issue on appeal. Employers appeal the deficiency finding that the job’s qualifications are not “consistent with the normal and accepted qualifications and requirements imposed by non-H-2B employers in the same occupation and area of intended employment” pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §655.20(e). (AF 179.) Specifically, the CO noted that Employers required the job applicant to have “cooking program certifications,” be “adept at reading and following recipes in multiple languages, especially Italian,” and have a “Private Vehicle Class C” driver’s license. (Id.) The CO found that these requirements exceeded the normal and accepted requirements of a private household cook. (Id.)

To remedy the deficiency, the CO directed Employers to submit the following items:

1. Documentation which demonstrates that the employer’s requirements for the job opportunity are consistent with the normal and accepted qualifications and requirements imposed by non-H-2B employers in the same occupation and area of intended employment; and
2. If applicable, in order for the employer’s application to remain consistent throughout, the employer must remove the requirements that are not normal and accepted qualifications from the application. This removal includes the ETA Form 9142 and/or the job order.

(Employers also appeal the deficiency finding that Employers failed to establish that the job opportunity is temporary in nature pursuant to 20 C.F.R. 655.6(a)-(b). (AF 180.) The CO found that Employers did not submit sufficient information to establish their requested employment period. (Id.) The CO noted that Employers requested a three-year term and provided the following explanation:

For purposes of this opinion, “AF” stands for “Appeal File.”
The position is much more subject to the category of the one-time 3-year term than that of a six-month or 1 year term that would be periodically renewable. So the Applicants are able to establish that the job is temporary even though the position of household cook is, in its underlying status, potentially permanent, that is now uncertain, much like a pilot program, dependent on changes in family income, needs of children, and the parents themselves.

(Id.) The CO did not accept this explanation, finding that “the employer has failed to indicate the factors that will lead to the worker no longer being needed at the end of the three year period.” (AF 181.) Instead, Employers’ statements suggested that they will need this service in the future. (Id.)

To remedy the deficiency, the CO directed Employers to submit the following items:

1. An explanation regarding why the worker will no longer be needed at the completion of the three year period of need;
2. An explanation regarding why the employer will not require the services or labor to be performed in the future on a permanent basis; and
3. Other evidence and documentation that similarly serves to justify the requested dates of need.

(Id.)

Employers’ Response to Notice of Deficiency

On June 21, 2016, Employers responded to the CO’s request, providing an explanation in support of their application. (AF 163.) To address the first deficiency, Employers authorized the CO make necessary alterations on their ETA Form 9142. (AF 165.) In particular, they requested that the Italian language and driver license requirements “be moved from ‘required’ for the position to ‘preferred but not required.’” (Id.)

In response to the CO’s request for documentation demonstrating that the job opportunity is temporary in nature, Employers submitted an explanation letter and altered their ETA Form 9142, Section B, Item 9. (AF 166.) In the explanation letter dated June 18, 2016, Employers described the circumstances which have necessitated hiring a household cook. (AF 171.) Employers stated that their businesses and professional activities have grown in the last few years such that it has become difficult to handle the workload and stress of managing multiple businesses while raising children. (Id.) Thus, Employers wrote that they will need a cook during the lunch and dinner hours of the days until:

1) the children grow to all be of school age, so that the responsibility to cook multiple meals diminishes; and
2) our businesses have stabilized where we can hire additional help in our other businesses and as a result we can work lesser hours.

(Id.)
Employers changed their ETA Form 9142 to show that the worker will not be needed at the end of the three-year period because of “the likelihood that the younger children will join their eldest sibling in school, and the expected stabilization of the Montgomery’s business activities will allow for more delegation and division of labor within three years.” (AF 166.) Employers argued that they will no longer require the services or labor in the future because of these factors. (Id.) Employers explained that their need for a cook is demonstrated by the family’s limited resources in both time and income, as seen on their IRS 1040 tax returns. (AF 167.) Finally, Employers said that they have no employee records to substantiate or disavow the total number of workers or the need of that quantity of workers because Employers have no prior workers under their present business form. (Id.)

Final Determination

On July 15, 2016, the CO issued a Non-Acceptance Denial (“Denial”). (AF 126-133.) The CO found that Employers failed to show that: their job requirements are normal and consistent and that their job is of a temporary nature. (Id.) The CO addressed the first deficiency, acknowledging that Employers changed their Italian language requirement to a preference. (AF 130.) However, the CO wrote that “the Department notes that all ‘preferences’ are considered to be ‘requirements’ for the purposes of the satisfying the obligations of H-2B employers.” (Id.) Accordingly, the CO found that Employers did not provide any documentation that demonstrated that Employers’ qualifications for the job opportunity are consistent with the normal and accepted qualifications and requirements imposed by non-H-2B employers in the same occupation and area of intended employment. (Id.)

The CO also found that Employer failed to show that its job opportunity is temporary in nature. (Id.) The CO wrote that

[T]he employer did not submit any documentation to support its statements that its professional and business obligations will be predictable or stable by June 25, 2019, that the children will be enrolled in a school program by June 25, 2019, or that the children have particular dietary requirements. The Department notes that, if the employer’s need for a Private household Cook to meet the children’s particular dietary requirements will end when the children enter school, then it appears that the children don’t really have particular dietary requirements necessitating the services of a private household cook.

(AF 132.) Consequently, the CO denied the application because Employers failed to establish a one-time need occurrence for a private household cook from June 2016 to June 2019. (Id.)

Appeal

On July 29, 2016, Employers submitted a request for review before the Board of Alien Labor Certification Appeals (“BALCA”). (AF 1-120.) Employers’ request included a brief and copies of documents already in the record. (Id.) On August 4, 2016, BALCA docketed Employers’ appeal. The undersigned received the Appeal File on August 10, 2016. In support of its appeal, Employers argued that: 1) the CO’s treatment of a “preference” as a “requirement”
represents arbitrary and capricious decision making; 2) Employers’ tax returns support both of their explanations as to why their need is temporary and; 3) California public schools have dieticians that attend to their children’s dietary needs. (AF 4-12.)

First, Employers argued that treating a “preference” as a “requirement” has “absolutely no regulatory, statutory support, nor even non-binding policy manual rule-making support.” (AF 5.) Employers stated that failure to enunciate any guidance at all to justify a finding that a preference is the equivalent of a requirement “is a blatant failure to uphold due process.” (AF 8.)

Second, Employers wrote that their tax returns support their explanations as to why their need is temporary. (AF 12.) Specifically, the tax returns show that Employers’ respective business activities have had a sizable growth in recent years, but are now stabilizing. (Id.) Employers listed their children’s ages and noted that one of them is presently enrolled.3 Employers cited to the California Education Code which mandates that all children between the ages of six and eighteen be enrolled in school. (Id.) Finally, Employers wrote that “the public schools of California have licensed dietitians who are charged with the responsibility of ensuring nutritious meals for the students under their care.” (Id.)

The CO’s Brief

The Associate Solicitor for Employment and Training Legal Services (“Solicitor”) filed a brief on August 18, 2016. The Solicitor argued that Employers failed to establish that their job requirements were normal and accepted for a household cook by failing to submit any evidence. (Solicitor’s Brief at 12-13.) The Solicitor explained that redefining a requirement as a preference did not reduce Employers’ obligations because the normal and accepted requirement applies equally to all job qualifications and requirements. (Id. at 13.)

The Solicitor argued that failure to inform Employers of the Department’s policy to treat “preferences” as “requirements” was not a violation of the regulations or any due process principles. (Id. at 13.) This is because the preference policy issue arose only after Employers’ NOD response. (Id.) Employers failed to comply with the NOD’s instructions to remove the requirements, and so the denial letter was the CO’s first opportunity to explain the policy. (Id.) The Solicitor stated that the preference policy implements the requirement in the regulation that job qualifications and requirements must all meet the same “normalcy” requirement. (Id.) The Solicitor argued that given the amount of information the application appeared to be missing, it would not have been possible for the CO, in the context of the NOD, to anticipate and describe every area in which the employer might potentially fail to meet its burden in its response to the NOD.

(Id. at 21.)

3 The undersigned cannot consider the children’s ages as Employers did not provide this information to the CO. BALCA can only consider evidence before the CO. 20 C.F.R. § 655.33(e)
The Solicitor explained that the “Household Cook” occupation requires only English proficiency and so the requirement that an applicant understand Italian far exceeds the normal qualifications for that position. (Id. at 16.) The Solicitor noted that Employers did not address the normalcy of their requirements and failed to submit any probative evidence that their job criteria were normal and accepted for non-H-2B employers. (Id. at 19.)

In regards to the second deficiency, the Solicitor argued that Employers failed to establish a temporary need by failing to establish that they will not need workers to perform the services in the future. (Id. at 22.) The Solicitor noted that Employers did not provide any documentation, apart from their two reasons, to substantiate their period of need. (Id. at 23.) The Solicitor cited to cases arguing that the employer has the burden “to establish, with some level of certainty, that its need is indeed temporary.” (Id.) The Solicitor found that Employers did not submit hard calculations, payroll or cost estimates, schedules, or any other documentation to prove an “event of short duration” requiring a temporary worker within a permanent employment situation. (Id. at 24.)

**Employers’ Response to CO’s Brief**

Employers filed a response to the CO’s brief on August 19, 2016. (Employers’ Response.) In its response, Employers argued that the key issue is “whether the employer complied with the requirements under the regulatory scheme.” (Employer’s Response at 8.) Employers described the regulatory scheme for an H-2B employer as follows:

First, he must list the job description with the requisite specifications necessary to give an American applicant the ability to identify the job position advertised, and make a decision concerning his comparative qualifications. Second, he must make sure that the job requirements are not more of a deterrent for an American job seeker than is the case for a foreign one.

(Id.) Employers stated that they complied with this regulatory scheme because they listed the same job skill qualifications on their Form 9142 and the job order. (Id.) Employers argued that by changing their requirements of Italian and specialty cuisine into preferences, Employers did not make their qualifications “more restrictive than those qualifications imposed upon a non-U.S. job applicant.” (Id.)

In response to the second deficiency, Employers wrote that

the bottom line to remember is that, in demonstrating a 3-year long single occurrence need, is that non-permanent status for the job is demonstrated simply by the fact that the employers have not employed any workers to perform the duties outlined in the job description of a household cook, and that it is not likely that petitioner will need this worker to perform the tasks of the position presented in the temporary labor certification’s application.
Employers argued that demanding profit and loss business statements to substantiate their intent to hire for a three-year term is not a realistic demand. (Id. at 11.) Employers further argued that their declaration “should be held sufficient, as opposed to the demand made by the Certifying Officer.” (Id. at 12.)

**SCOPE OF REVIEW**

BALCA has a limited standard of review in H-2B cases. Specifically, BALCA may only consider the appeal file, the parties’ legal briefs, and the employer’s request for review, which may only contain legal arguments and evidence actually submitted before the CO. 20 C.F.R. § 655.33(e). As discussed above, Employers submitted several exhibits along with their legal brief. All of these exhibits are copies of documents already in the Appeal File. After considering the evidence, BALCA must take one of the following actions in deciding the case:

1. Affirm the CO’s denial of temporary labor certification, or
2. Direct the CO to grant temporary labor certification, or
3. Remand to the CO for further action.

20 C.F.R. § 655.33(e)(1)-(3).

**DISCUSSION**

1. Did Employers establish that their job requirements are consistent with the normal and accepted requirements imposed by non-H-2B employers?

According to federal regulations, an H-2B job opportunity “must be bona fide and consistent with the normal and accepted qualifications and requirements imposed by non-H-2B employers in the same occupation and area of intended employment.” 20 C.F.R. §655.20(e). In determining whether an employer’s qualifications are “normal and accepted,” BALCA generally defers to the experience requirements listed in the O*Net database. See e.g., Golden Construction Services, Inc., 2013-TLN-00030 (Feb. 26, 2013); A B Controls & Technology, Inc., 2013-TLN-00022 (Jan. 17, 2013); Evanco Environmental Technologies, Inc., 2012-TLN-00022, slip op. at 7 (March 28, 2012); Jourose LLC, D/B/A Tong Thai Cuisine, 2011-TLN-00030, slip op. at 5 (June 15, 2011).

It is appropriate to take official notice of the O*Net descriptions. See 29 C.F.R. § 18.201; The Cherokee Group, 1991-INA-280 (Nov. 4, 1992). Additionally, as the CO specifically relied on this information in making his determination, it does not undermine the Board’s limited scope of review to take official notice of the O*Net database. When an employer’s experience requirement exceeds the typical experience requirement for the occupation in O*Net, the employer bears the burden of demonstrating that its experience requirement is “normal and accepted” for non H-2B employers in the same or comparable occupations. See e.g., Jourose LLC, 2011-TLN-00030; Massey Masonry, 2012-TLN-00038 (June 22, 2012); S&B Construction, LLC, 2012-TLN-00046 (Sept. 19, 2012); A B Controls & Technology, Inc., 2013-TLN-00022.
Under O*Net Code 35-2013, the position “Cooks, Private Household” requires knowledge of the English language and does not require any other language skills.4 Thus, Employers’ language preference exceeded the normal and accepted qualifications and requirements imposed by non-H2B employers. Employers did not argue that knowledge of Italian was normal and accepted for private household cooks. Instead, they argued that a preference for Italian is different from a requirement.

Employers are correct in finding that there is no express regulation or non-binding policy statement which states that “preferences” are treated as “requirements.” However, as the CO explained, this policy merely implements the regulations’ normalcy requirement. BALCA has previously held that employers’ preferences will be treated as requirements. Four Corners Masonry, Inc. 2015-TLN-00039 at *7 (April 2, 2015)(finding that “BALCA has interpreted employer preferences as job requirements.”); see Sodette Simeonidis, 2013-TLN-00055 (July 2, 2013); see also Anchorage City Limits Lofts d/b/a/ The Lofts, 2014-TLN-00041 (October 17, 2014).

In Sodette Simeonidis, BALCA analogized temporary labor certification regulations to permanent labor certification regulations, which considered preferences as requirements. Sodette Simeonidis at *4. In that case, BALCA found that including a preference for “familiarity with Jamaican culture” will “further limit the number of U.S. Applicants applying and its inclusion would likely have a chilling effect.” Id. at 5. Similarly, Employers’ preference for an Italian speaker would have a chilling effect on the number of U.S. applicants. The preference would discourage applicants who may not be “adept at multiple languages.” Notably, Employers could have removed this requirement but instead chose to re-characterize it as a preference, demonstrating that this quality is important in the selection process. Thus, Employers’ Italian language preference exceeds the normal and accepted qualifications and requirements for a private household cook.

Employers also asserted that the CO’s failure to inform them of the preferences policy constitutes arbitrary and capricious decision-making because Employers had no opportunity to come into compliance with the law. Employers changed their objectionable requirements into preferences under the belief that this alteration would bring them into compliance. Under the regulations, the CO must provide an employer with notice and an opportunity to cure a deficiency before denying an application. See 20 C.F.R. §655.141(b)(1) (notice of deficiency must state reasons why application fails to meet criteria for acceptance). While Employers’ argument has some merit, Employers had sufficient notice of the deficiency. BALCA case law establishes that for H-2B certification purposes, preferences are treated as requirements. In the NOD, the CO requested Employers to either explain why their requirements are normal and accepted or remove the requirements that are not normal and accepted. The NOD did not instruct Employers to alter their requirements. Employers did not comply with the CO’s request, rather than removing the requirements or proving that these requirements are normal and accepted Employers re-characterized the requirements as preferences. As the CO noted, the CO is not required to anticipate and inform an H-2B employer of every possible compliance issue that is not before the CO. The CO did not anticipate that Employers would change their

4 http://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/35-2013.00.
requirements to preferences. Thus, the CO’s decision to deny the application by treating Employers’ preferences as requirements was not arbitrary and capricious because Claimant had sufficient notice of what was necessary to come into compliance.

In sum, the regulations at 20 C.F.R. Part 655, Subpart A require employers to show that their job requirements are consistent with the normal and accepted qualifications and requirements imposed by non-H-2B employers in the same occupation and area of intended employment. Employers did not provide any evidence that their job preferences are normal and accepted. Additionally, their argument that the regulations do not permit treating preferences as requirements is without merit as BALCA has held that it will consider preferences as requirements. Thus, the CO properly found that Employers did not cure this deficiency.5

2. Did Employer establish that its job opportunity is temporary in nature?

In order to establish eligibility for certification under the H-2B program, an employer must establish that its need for nonagricultural services or labor qualifies as temporary under one of the four temporary need standards: one-time occurrence, seasonal, peakload, or intermittent basis, as defined by the DHS. See 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(15)(H)(ii)(b); 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(h)(6); 20 C.F.R. § 655.6(b). The DHS regulations provide that employment “is of a temporary nature when the employer needs a worker for a limited period of time. The employer must establish that the need for the employee will end in the near, definable future.” 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(h)(6)(ii)(B). That period of time is usually limited to less than one year but may last up to three years in cases of a one-time event. (Id.) The employer bears the burden of establishing the temporary nature of its need. 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(h)(6)(ii)(B)(1); see also Tampa Ship, 2009-TLN-44, slip op. at 5 (May 8, 2009).

Here, Employer requests temporary workers for a “one-time occurrence.” In order to establish a one-time occurrence:

The petitioner must establish that it has not employed workers to perform the services or labor in the past and that it will not need workers to perform the services or labor in the future, or that it has an employment situation that is otherwise permanent, but a temporary event of short duration has created the need for a temporary worker.

8 C.F.R. § 214.2(h)(6)(ii)(B)(1). Since the regulations provide no guidance as to precisely what documentation an employer should submit, ETA has published a list of Frequently Asked Questions (“FAQs”) to help guide applicants. Regarding the documentation required for establishing a one-time temporary need, the FAQs state, “[e]vidence that has been used in cases of one-time need includes contracts showing the need for the onetime services, letters of intent from clients, news reports, event announcements, and similar documentation.” See ETA, H-2B FAQs – Round II at 3, http://www.foreignlaborcert.doleta.gov/pdf/h2b_faqs_round2.pdf.

5 Even considering that the CO improperly denied Employers’ application by failing to inform them of the preference policy, Employers application nevertheless fails because they failed to cure the second deficiency. See discussion infra.
In response to the CO’s document production request, Employer presented an explanation letter, and some financial documents. The financial information included Employers’ W-2’s for 2015 and 2014, joint tax returns for 2013 and 2014, and one of the Employers’ 2015 shareholder distributions from a company. (AF 272-284.) In the explanation letter, Employers stated that they will no longer require a cook once: 1) all the children are enrolled in school and; 2) Employers’ businesses stabilize.

The CO found that Employers did not meet their burden of establishing temporary need because Employers did not provide evidence to substantiate their arguments. The record supports the CO’s conclusion that Employers did not provide sufficient arguments and evidence to establish that their need is temporary.

a. Children’s enrollment in school

Employers asserted that their need for a household cook will diminish once all of their children are in school because Employers will no longer need to cook multiple meals for their children. While this factor supports Employers’ temporary need, it does not establish a date of need from June 2016 through June 2019. Employers did not provide any evidence that all of the children will be in school by June 2019. In their brief, Employers listed the children’s ages and the California Education Code providing that all children must be in school by the age of six. As discussed, because Employers did not provide this information to the CO, BALCA cannot consider it.

It also appears that this factor will not have a significant impact on Employers’ circumstances. Employers’ job description provides that the cook will be serving lunch and dinner and will work from noon to seven p.m. (AF 52, 136.) Employers noted that one of their children already attends school. (AF 166.) Thus, the need to prepare lunch for two children does not explain why Employers require a full-time chef to prepare daily lunch and dinner for the next three years.

b. Stabilization of Employers’ businesses

Employers also argued that they will no longer require a cook once their businesses stabilize. To support their argument, Employers provided their tax returns. In their brief, Employers argued that their financial documents show that their respective business activities have had a sizable growth in recent years, but are now stabilizing.

Employers have not met their burden in establishing the need as temporary through the submitted evidence. Contrary to their argument, Employers’ did not provide sufficient evidence to show that their business activities have had sizable growth in recent years and are now stabilizing. Mr. Montgomery’s W-2 forms show that he earned the same income in 2014 and 2015. (AF 272, 278.) Mrs. Montgomery’s W-2 forms show that she earned $11,000 more in

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The undersigned notes that school calendars generally run from September through June, so a temporary need ending in the month of June, based on children’s enrollment in school, does not accord with typical school calendars.
2015 than she did in 2014. (AF 273, 279.) Employers’ tax returns show that they had a higher income in 2013 than they did in 2014. (AF 276-284.) While these documents demonstrate that Employers earned more in recent years, they do not establish that Employers’ businesses have had “sizable growth” nor do they prove that their businesses are now stabilizing. Employers failed to explain how these documents support their position. Specifically, they did not point to any information in their tax returns which demonstrate that their businesses have increased and are now beginning to stabilize. Furthermore, it is unclear how three years of tax returns are sufficient to show growth and stabilization.

Employers did not explain how they determined that their businesses will stabilize in three years. A bare assertion without supporting evidence is insufficient to carry the employer’s burden of proof. AB Controls & Technology, Inc., 2013-TLN-00022 (Jan. 17, 2013). Employers selected the maximum permissible time under the regulations and speculated that their need will end at the end of the three year maximum term. Employers’ rationale and tax returns do not explain why their businesses will become more stable in three years as opposed to two years or even one year.

Consequently, Employers have failed to establish that they have a need for a private household cook under a one-time occurrence need from June 26, 2016 through June 25, 2019. Thus, the CO properly denied the application on this basis.

ORDER

In light of the foregoing, it is hereby ORDERED that the Certifying Officer’s Final Determination denying Employers’ ETA Form 9142, H-2B Application for Temporary Employment Certification is AFFIRMED.

For the Board:

THERESA C. TIMLIN
Administrative Law Judge