

The Virgin Islands Consortium

More Than US\$300M Earned by Jamaicans From US Seasonal Employment Programs

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JAMAICA — Jamaica Minister of Labour and Social Security, Shahine Robinson, says Jamaican workers participating in the United States agricultural and hospitality employment programs have generated upwards of an estimated US\$300 million in earnings over the past five years, according to the government-run news service.

Additionally, she said the number of persons taking up jobs in both sectors has risen to average nearly 7,000 per annum.

“The significance of the United States agricultural and hospitality employment programs cannot be overstated... The impact on the local economy is striking,” Mrs. Robinson said.

She was speaking during a recent awards dinner for overseas farm and hospitality workers at the Melia Braco Resort in Trelawny.

Mrs. Robinson said numerous families have benefited from Jamaicans' participation in both programs upwards of the past 50 years, noting that the children and grandchildren of many of these individuals have gone on to distinguish themselves in various academic, professional and vocational pursuits.

She indicated that under the agricultural component, workers are dispatched by the Ministry to take up employment opportunities in several states, including Vermont, New York, Washington and Massachusetts.

Mrs. Robinson further noted that while males were the sole participants in this area over the years, the trend was broken in 2017 when the first group of 64 females took up employment at Gebbers Farms in Brewster, Washington.

She said the women, who joined 600 men who were already working there, were mainly involved in harvesting and packing cherries during their stint.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Robinson is assuring that that US federal laws and regulations provide significant safeguards for foreign workers, particularly persons involved in agriculture.

She explained that the provisions are aimed at protecting individuals from exploitation and abuse as well as ensuring that United States workers are not negatively impacted by the employment of their foreign counterparts.

Among the potential negative factors, the minister noted, is downward pressure on wages associated with the recruitment of temporary workers.

"Apart from wages, employers are required to pay the cost of transportation, such as air travel from Jamaica to a port of entry in the United States and then ground transportation to the farm," the Minister added.

Mrs. Robinson contended, however, that agricultural and hospitality programs continue to make "a significant contribution to the development of Jamaica's economy".