A year ago I wrote a column for AWCI’s Construction Dimensions on a proposed Canadian federal government pilot project to allow foreign construction workers temporarily into Ontario. The idea was to provide relief for construction contractors short of skilled labor during the hot construction economy.

Fast forward to the present day and the pilot is running, with the feds and the Greater Toronto Home Builders Association working together to make it happen.

Initially, critics were concerned that the pilot, called Construction Recruitment External Workers Services (CREWS) would exclude certain sectors of the building industry, including contractors in the EIFS sector. That hasn’t been the case. Through CREWS, EIFS contractor Granolite Company Ltd. has brought seven stucco workers from Argentina to Toronto, and the contractor could land another seven this spring to help curb the shortfall of skilled workers in the exterior stucco trade. Granolite’s Nit Faienza says CREWS has helped ensure that the contracting firm has enough skilled applicators in the busy Toronto construction economy.

What’s more, for every foreign worker hired, the Canadian employer must hire two Canadian workers. That hasn’t been a problem at Granolite, says Faienza, noting that CREWS opens an opportunity for contractors like Granolite to hire more Canadian apprentices who can train under the leadership of skilled foreign workers.

As EIFS is not a commonly applied finish in Argentina, the workers brought to Canada by Granolite require some training in the application methods. But Faienza says the English language can be a bigger barrier than EIFS because the Argentinians are skilled applicators who quickly pick up the process of applying EIFS.

Heading to Argentina for help was an easy decision. Nic’s father, John, who is president of Granolite, was raised in the South American country and still has friends and family in construction businesses there. Couple that with Argentina’s economic meltdown, and Granolite had a sure bet of finding the skilled tradespeople it needed.

This isn’t the first time the contractor has recruited labor from Argentina. About 10 years ago it imported help, but the immigration process was time-consuming and difficult. CREWS has eliminated much of that red tape. This time, Argentinian workers settled in on the job in Toronto about three months after the Granolite people filled out immigration processing forms.

Under the program, Canadian contractors are required to provide each worker with a two-way flight and help the new arrivals secure accommodation. The Canucks are also obligated to provide each worker with a medical benefit package for the first three months of their stay, at which point they are eligible for coverage under the province’s Ontario Health Insurance Plan.

Faienza says one of the keys to the continued success of CREWS is an in-depth screening process to ensure foreign applicants meet the requirements of the work in Toronto. To date, CREWS has brought close to 200 foreign workers skilled in various contracting professions to the Toronto market. Workers are permitted to stay up to two years (that time period could change as the pilot evolves) with a Canadian contractor. Journeyman EIFS applicators make $26 (Cdn. funds) an hour.

The labor shortage is likely to continue for some time as the construction economy continues to operate in high gear in Toronto. Critics of CREWS fear that the federal government is less likely to look at other measures to curb trades scarcities now that it has implemented CREWS.

About the Author
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