



The JCLO Monthly

JAMAICA

YOUR PARTNER FOR RELIABLE WORKERS

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Photo: Willis Newman (left) and Andre Williams, Jamaican H2A workers at Mountain Orchard in Schoharie NY

We are truly glad to share with you how Jamaica is preparing our workers for success and the difference they continue to make across the United States. Behind every update is a story of families being supported, orchards being sustained, and partnerships that grow stronger each season.

This is our way of keeping you close to those stories. We want you to see not only the systems we are improving but also the people and relationships that make this programme so meaningful. Your trust and feedback guide us. Because of you, JCLO continues to stand as a reliable partner in overseas employment.

Thank you for walking this journey with us.

Inside JCLO Worker Preparation & Programme Impact



Colette Roberts Ridsen, CD
Permanent Secretary,
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Programmes

For over 70 years, Jamaican farmworkers had visa free entry to the USA

Jamaican farmworkers entered the United States without visas, an exemption no other country enjoyed. From 1943 until 2016, they crossed borders on trust alone, laying the foundation for today's fast-track system that processes most Jamaican H-2A visas in under a week, with approval rates above 95 percent.

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Washington, USA



Photo: Jamaican H2A worker shares a smile while harvesting peppers.

Returnees Are the Institutional Memory on U.S. Farms

Every fall, in the rolling hills of upstate New York, a fleet of buses pulls into Northern Orchard. Nearly 150 Jamaican men step out, many carrying the same duffel bags they've carried for decades. Some have been harvesting apples on this land for almost 40 years.

"They know the orchard like the back of their hand," said Jesse Mulbury, the farm's third-generation owner. "Honestly, we wouldn't exist year to year without them."

In the conversation about seasonal labour, much attention goes to raw numbers: visas issued, crops saved, and wages earned. But on farms like Mulbury's, Jamaica's migrant workers represent something more intangible: institutional memory.

Orchards are ecosystems of routine and subtlety. Branches arch differently year to year. Soil shifts with the weather. Fruit bruises with a careless touch. Mulbury describes apples as "like raw eggs" fragile, unsellable if handled too roughly. Those lessons aren't easily taught.

For returning Jamaicans, the knowledge is second nature. Veteran pickers know which rows ripen fastest, which ladders wobble, which bins must be loaded in sequence. Their presence means that when a new recruit joins, training is shortened from weeks to days.

"Many of our guys know the orchard better than some of our family members," Mulbury said. "They've passed down tips across generations, and that's what makes harvest possible."

Mulbury remembers workers teaching him as a boy how to prune and spray the trees. Now in his 30s, he watches younger Jamaicans arrive,

"hungry" to learn and willing to take on training beyond the contract. Some enroll in USDA courses on pesticide application or food-safety rules, absorbing techniques to bring back to their own farms at home.

That blend of veteran expertise and new eagerness creates a system of informal mentorship. It is not designed by policy but by practice: older men pass on tricks of the trade; younger ones absorb, adapt, and refine.

Farmers often admit an awkward truth: Jamaican workers outpace locals. "The Jamaican workers are vastly more efficient than U.S. workers," Mulbury said bluntly. "It may be embarrassing, but we wouldn't be getting very far without them."

As older workers near retirement, the question looms: who will inherit their tacit knowledge? Mulbury sees the answer in the younger generation of men eager to take extra training, motivated not only by wages but by the chance to improve their own farms back home. The Jamaican government's strategy of pairing newcomers with veterans reinforces that pipeline. Skills don't vanish with retirement; they are transferred, season after season, across oceans and generations.

In an industry defined by volatility, that human chain may be Jamaica's greatest advantage. "It's not just labour," Mulbury reflected. "It's memory. And without that memory, we'd be lost."

Inside Jamaica's Farmwork Machine

It looks effortless: workers arrive for their interviews, visas are processed within days, and flights depart on time. Behind the smooth choreography of Jamaica's H-2A programme is a finely tuned partnership between the Government of Jamaica and the U.S. Embassy, built on precision, planning, and trust. Each season, thousands of workers move through the Ministry of Labour's centralised system, where background checks, health screenings, and pre-departure orientations happen in rapid succession. Once cleared, the Embassy's consular team takes over, processing renewals in as little as 48 hours and first-time applications within a week.

Officials describe it as a shared rhythm, two institutions working in sync to make what is complex appear simple. "Preparation, communication, and trust hold everything together," one senior official said. "When every team understands its role, you get seamless execution." Much like a well-produced event, the process runs on coordination. The JLO designs every stage with the same discipline used to plan high-profile ceremonies: structured timelines, designated responsibilities, and tight reporting. Each department knows its deliverables, from recruitment to orientation to the Embassy's interview scheduling and final sign-off. "The success comes from treating each phase like part of one production," an officer explained. "It is not about rushing; it is about timing. Every handoff matters."



Photo: In this file photo, Rallin McDonald, left, and Norman Wedderburn, right, both from Jamaica, work the fields on a farm in southern Ontario.

That approach mirrors the best practices Jamaica applies in other national events, such as the precision of planning, the attention to detail, and the focus on outcomes that reflect credibility and excellence. The Embassy has matched that energy by prioritising H-2 processing and maintaining constant dialogue with JCLO teams. The result is a migration pipeline where friction is rare and communication is constant. Employers in the United States describe Jamaica’s turnaround times as unmatched, noting that workers not only arrive prepared but also integrate quickly because they are briefed, oriented, and supported before departure.

Orientation sessions cover workplace rights, safety standards, and U.S. cultural norms, the final step before workers are transported directly to the airport. By the time they land in Florida, Michigan, or New York, the paperwork is settled and expectations are clear.

“It is about readiness,” said a JCLO administrator. “When our workers leave, they already know what is ahead. That is what makes the integration seamless.” The system’s strength lies not in grand gestures but in its consistency. Even as global labour mobility becomes more complex, Jamaica’s model has remained disciplined and adaptable, the product of years of collaboration between the Ministry and the Embassy.

As one official put it, “Excellence is never accidental. It comes from structure, communication, and deliberate care.”

The H-2A programme may be a logistical machine, but behind every flight is a story of efficiency grounded in human relationships. What happens in Kingston each week, the careful coordination between ministries, Embassy staff, and employers, is more than administration. It is a quiet success story that keeps both economies moving.

The Exception That Shaped a Program: Jamaica’s Visa-Free Past



Photo: Jamaican farmers at work in St Elizabeth, Jamaica

In the summer of 1943, as American men shipped off to fight in Europe and the Pacific, farms across the United States faced a crisis: who would bring in the crops? The answer came, unexpectedly, from the Caribbean. That year, the United States invited Jamaican workers to fill urgent labour shortages, planting the seed for what would become one of the longest-running seasonal labour pipelines in the Western Hemisphere. For more than seven decades, Jamaicans crossed American borders on trust alone. Until 2016, agricultural workers from the island entered the United States legally without H-2A visas, an exemption unmatched by any other country. “We have been coming to the United States since 1943,” said Colette Roberts

Risden, Jamaica's Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. "Our workers actually predate the H-2A program that was formalised in 1986."

That quirk of policy is no mere historical footnote. It underpins today's extraordinary efficiency in Jamaica's handling of U.S. seasonal visas. While employers in Mexico often wait days as workers trek across the country to consular offices, Jamaicans are processed through a government-run system in Kingston that routinely turns around visas in under a week. Returnees often don't need interviews at all. The U.S. Embassy in Kingston, which now processes nearly 17,000 H-2 visas annually, describes its approach as "Mission Mexico-style efficiency" and Jamaica ranks second worldwide only to Mexico in overall H-2 volume.

Today, that history still shows in the metrics. Over 90 percent of Jamaican seasonal workers return to the same employer each year. Visa approval rates hover above 95 percent, far outpacing many

competitor countries. And unlike ad hoc recruitment systems elsewhere, Jamaica maintains a pool of 2,500 pre-screened workers ready for deployment. These numbers matter for employers facing razor-thin margins. A missed week in apple season can wipe out profits. A late arrival in landscaping can upend contracts. By leveraging its legacy of trust, Jamaica has positioned itself as not just another labour supplier but a premium one.

Other countries in the region have struggled to replicate Jamaica's model. Some, like Haiti, face logistical and security hurdles that make consular processing unpredictable. Others, like the Dominican Republic, rely on private recruiters who charge workers steep fees, fuelling concerns about exploitation. Jamaica's government-run approach, rooted in its exceptional visa-free past, avoids many of those pitfalls.

The result is a brand identity: Jamaican workers are not only English-speaking and culturally familiar to Americans, but also part of a system that prizes speed, transparency, and continuity.

What Every Apple Costs: A Father's Season Far From Home



Photo: -----

SCHOHARIE, N.Y. — On a crisp September morning, Andre Williams rose before dawn in a modest farmhouse tucked into the Schoharie Valley. By sunrise, he was already among the apple trees, a canvas bag strapped across his chest, his hands moving quickly and gently through rows heavy with fruit. Each apple he picked, one of thousands he would gather that week, carried a purpose beyond the orchard: the chance to keep his children in school and his wife in nursing college back home in Jamaica.

"This is not just work," Williams said. "This is how I make sure my family has a future." Williams, 40, is one of more than 10,000 Jamaicans who travel each year to the United States under the federal H-2A program.

For him, the decision was simple economics. At a gas station job in Clarendon, his weekly pay was about 10,000 Jamaican dollars, roughly \$65. At Terrace Mountain Orchard in Schoharie, his paycheck is closer to \$700. "What I make here in a week, I make in maybe two months in Jamaica," he said.

The math is life-altering. Each Friday, part of his wages is wired home; the rest he uses to buy American goods that are cheaper or unavailable in Jamaica. His family receives not only money but packages, clothes, household items, small comforts that remind them they are cared for even in his absence.

Before arriving in Schoharie in 2022, Williams worked on a larger farm near the Canadian border, where dozens of Jamaican men shared cramped quarters. Contact with owners was rare. "In three years, I never spoke to the owner," Williams recalled. "Only the supervisor and other Jamaicans."

Schoharie has been different. At Terrace Mountain Orchard, he and fellow worker Willis Newman are the only two Jamaicans tending 50 acres of trees. That intimacy has brought not only more responsibility but a sense of belonging. He speaks with the owners daily, chats with local staff in the farm store, and is recognized in the village when he shops or browses garage sales on his days off.

"I like it here because I get to talk to different people, not just Jamaicans," he said. "It makes you feel more a part of the place."

The gains, however, come with sacrifice. For six months of the year, Williams is more than a thousand miles from his wife and children. FaceTime calls soften the distance but cannot erase it. He admits to missing birthdays, school events, and the ordinary rituals of family life.

"There is no easy way to be gone so long," he said. "But I think of what it gives them, and I know I must stay strong."

Williams plans to keep returning to Schoharie for years to come. He hopes to match Newman, who has logged 16 seasons in the valley and is a fixture in the community. "I've got 20 years left in me if I want to catch up with him," Williams said with a smile.

We want to hear from you!

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