

Inside Berkshire County's construction labor shortage: what it means for homeowners

- By Nate Harrington, The Berkshire Eagle

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Chris Keener, left, and Bill Poette, both carpenters with Geary Builders, install drywall at a job site on October Hill Drive in Lenox. In 2010, there were 652 more people working in the construction industry than in 2023, according to the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

GREAT BARRINGTON — When Britta Schellenberg tried to get her windows replaced in her 1820s farmhouse, she hit a bottleneck.

"It's really hard to find somebody who can do the job well, who has experience in it, who is insured [and] who can pull permits with the town," she said.

What Schellenberg ran into is becoming common across Berkshire County: a limited supply of licensed contractors struggling to meet steady demand for home repairs and renovations. With fewer workers entering the trades and more aging out, projects are taking longer, prices are rising and homeowners are increasingly left to choose between waiting months for help or taking chances with unlicensed labor.



Homeowners in the Berkshires have to deal with a shrinking and aging workforce, increasing waits along the project timeline and higher prices when they look to get renovations done.
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Several local factors in the Berkshires are intensifying the shortage. An aging housing stock creates a demand for contractors. And the pipeline to replenish the construction workforce with skilled workers isn't keeping pace with those who are aging out and taking their knowledge and experience with them.

In 2010, there were 652 more people working in the construction industry — which is made up of contractors and the skilled trades — than in 2023, according to the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Without skilled and licensed laborers, homeowners looking to remodel or renovate their home could turn to unlicensed workers. That's a big risk if something goes wrong.

\$5.45 million in funds announced for 11 Berkshire County municipalities to rehabilitate homes, fix senior center

Schellenberg's search for a contractor started after a Mass Save evaluation of her home's energy efficiency qualified her for a rebate on new windows, she said.

However, the contractors she found were "short on time or the quotes are really high," Schellenberg said.

Homeowners aren't alone in feeling the effects. Contractors are also experiencing the shortage of labor, said Cara Puntin, a project manager for Geary Builders, a general construction company in Adams.

"We're having to push out projects further because of the amount of work that we're getting," Puntin said.



Chris Keener, left, and Bill Poette, both carpenters with Geary Builders, install drywall at a job site in Lenox. The company has seen increasing wait times, both in the lead up to projects and to complete them, because of a lack of skilled laborers in Berkshire County.

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Jean-Christophe Rioux, who owns and manages Beta Contracting in New Marlborough, said his schedule is "easily booked out six months ahead."

Rioux has had to tell clients, "Look, I really want to do your project, it's a six-month wait time. If you don't want to wait that long, I understand that, feel free to look around and call other contractors."

Can you seal your eviction in Massachusetts? Yes — but it might take some time

However, calling around likely won't yield different results, Rioux said. That's because all contractors are tied to the same limited pool of skilled laborers, and that's where the true bottleneck lies.

"One carpenter is being split between like six contractors," he said.



"[New laborers] don't have that same mentality that the older generation does that is retiring," said Cara Puntin, a project manager for Geary Builders. "We're finding that some of the guys that are retiring, we don't have that somebody to fill that niche."

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"It almost feels like you either have to pay an exorbitant amount to get the work done right and well and fast," Britta Schellenberg said. "Or you have to really dive in, find the right contractor and put in a lot of energy and time and still a lot of money into these projects."

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This results in homeowners bearing the financial brunt that comes with steady demand and faltering supply.

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Part of the reason that the industry has seen declining growth is its reliance on aging skilled laborers.

"We're finding that some of the guys that are retiring, we don't have that somebody to fill that niche," Puntin said. "We're not replacing those people [who] are retiring."

From 2010 to 2023, the number of people in construction, which includes jobs like contractors, electricians and carpenters, fell by 652 or 14.2 percent in Berkshire County.

The chart depicts the total number of workers in the construction industry in Berkshire County for each year. From 2012 to 2013, the industry saw its largest decrease of 339 workers.

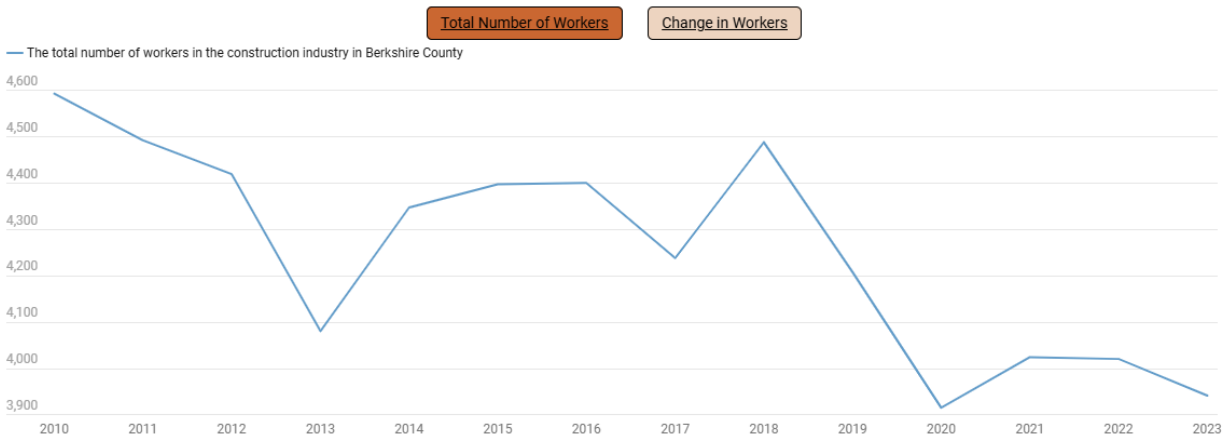


Chart: Nate Harrington, The Berkshire Eagle • Source: Census Bureau • Created with Datawrapper

Even if licensed contractors and workers aren't available, home repairs still need to get done. But unlicensed contractors come with a risk, Rioux said.

"Massachusetts only protects homeowners who hire licensed contractors," he said. "If you had that plumbing done with an unlicensed plumber or if you had that carpentry done and your ceiling collapsed from an unlicensed contractor, then you have no recourse."

Vacant since 2019, the former Adams' Community Center is becoming 13 apartments

However, the continuing decline in the number of workers entering the trades might be changing soon.

"Over the last three years, we've graduated 50 carpenters, 52 electricians and about 50 welders," said James Brosnan, the superintendent of McCann Technical School in North Adams.

The increase in enrollment started just before COVID-19, Brosnan said.

"We've got full enrollment in these majors," he said. "[The younger generation] are involved in the trades."

Despite the promising signs in North Adams, the lack of a vocational school south of Pittsfield might be exacerbating the problem in Southern Berkshire County, Brosnan said. Without a pipeline of laborers nearby, it is hard for companies to attract workers.

"There are jobs here, so they're employed here," Brosnan said, referring to Northern Berkshire County.

Trade school isn't the only option: Some workers are apprenticing on the job, pairing with an experienced worker to learn the trade. Puntin said Geary Builders has used that strategy.

Still, losing the decades of learned experience means the workforce is going to suffer, Puntin said. "They don't have that same mentality that the older generation does that is retiring."

Even as young workers filter into the workforce, homeowners still have to repair their homes.

For Schellenberg, this meant looking outside Berkshire County. She ended up hiring a contractor from Springfield to replace her windows.

"I really want to give the work to somebody in the Berkshires," she said. "It's just tricky to do that on important projects in the house."

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