

Berkshire unemployment rate drops to lowest level since before pandemic. But the numbers don't tell the whole story

- By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle
- Jan 25, 2022



The Berkshire County unemployment rate is now at its lowest point since the pandemic began, but workforce professionals are cautious when assessing that 4.4 percent figure.
AP FILE PHOTO

PITTSFIELD — The Berkshire County unemployment rate dropped more than a full percentage point in December, and it is now lower than it has been since the pandemic began to impact the local economy in April 2020.

But one Berkshire workforce development professional believes the county's current jobless rate of 4.4 percent, which the state [released](#) on Tuesday, is at odds with what's occurring on the ground.

“The numbers don't seem to reflect what we're hearing from our companies,” said Heather Boulger, the executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield. “Our companies continue to struggle to find workers and we're doing everything we can to give people the tools that they need to be able to re-enter employment. But there still seems to be a little bit of a gap.”

The Berkshire jobless rate, which was 5.5 percent in November, has dropped below 5 percent for the first time in 22 months, and is at its lowest point since February and March 2020 when it reached 4.1 percent shortly before the pandemic sent local unemployment soaring into double figures. But the Berkshire rate is still higher than the state unemployment rate, which fell from 4.6 percent to 3.5 percent in December. The national unemployment rate is 3.9 percent.

“Don’t get me wrong; it’s positive news. It’s good news,” Boulger said, referring to the drop. “There’s 200 more people employed (in the Berkshires) from November to December. The unemployment rate’s going down, but I’m still cautious when comparing it to pre-pandemic levels.”

As examples, Boulger said there were roughly 2,000 fewer local residents in the entire Berkshire labor force, which includes the employed and unemployed, last month compared to December 2019. A similar trend is visible in the number of employed Berkshire residents, which has dropped by almost 3,000 since two Decembers ago, she said.

Boulger referred to the drop in the county’s total labor force as “pretty significant in the Berkshires. There are 2,000 fewer people who are not working, or have given up on this labor market, or who have retired or moved away. We don’t know necessarily where those people went.

“When you only have 59,000 or 60,000 people in the labor force, [and] you take away 2,000, that’s a pretty significant chunk.”

The Berkshire unemployment rate traditionally drops in December because of seasonal hiring in the retail sector, before rising in January, when those employees are laid off.

“I don’t expect to see that trend,” in the retail sector this year, Boulger said.

The labor participation rate in the Berkshires is currently 61.9 percent compared to 63.4 percent before the pandemic prior to the pandemic. The average earnings in Berkshire County have improved by 4.2 percent since December 2020.

“It’s just showing that employers are trying to be more creative,” Boulger said, referring to the increase in earnings. “They’re trying to offer more bonuses, they’re making wages to try and attract job seekers. The issue there is whether companies are going to be able to sustain those wages and those benefits.”

The unemployment rates in the Great Barrington, North Adams and Pittsfield labor market areas all dropped in December, as did the rates in every Berkshire city and town, according to Boulger. In the Berkshires’ two cities, unemployment dropped 1.5 points to 4.8 percent in Pittsfield, and by 1.7 points to 5.5 percent in North Adams.

Upward trends occurred in the Berkshires’ leisure/hospitality; professional/business; manufacturing, construction and transportation job sectors during December, according to the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board.

More than 2,000 jobs in the Berkshires are posted on the state’s Job Quest website in every occupation and industry. The MassHire Career Center has workshops, job fairs and career counseling offered both in-person and virtually, with information available at [MassHireBerkshireCC.com](https://www.masshireberkshirecc.com)

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