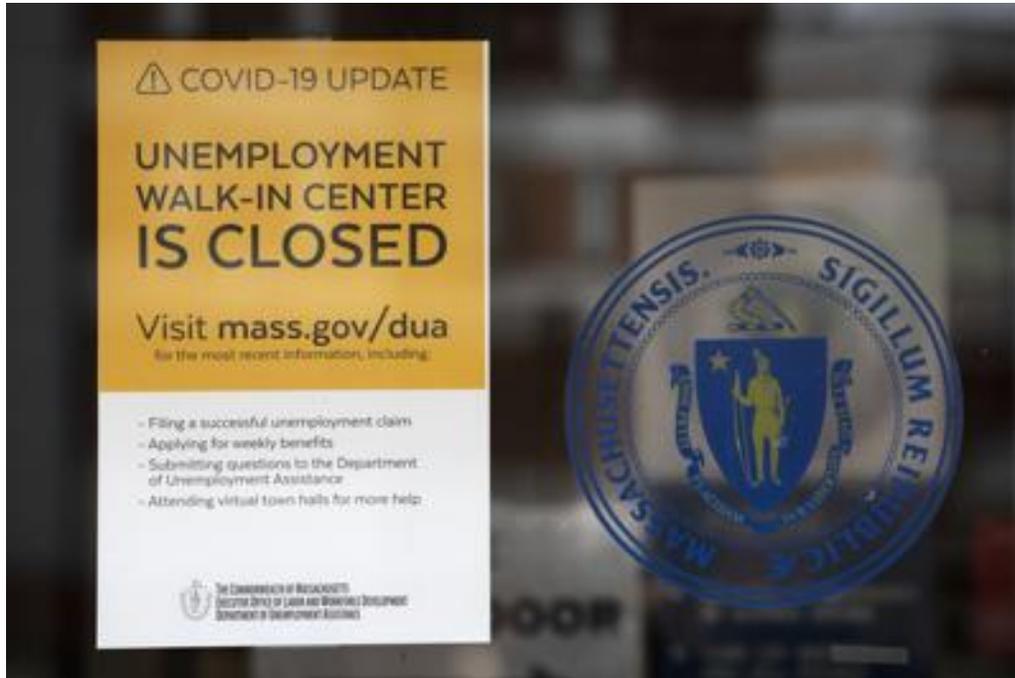


## Jobless rate in Berkshires jumps to highest since September

- By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle
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A sign announces the closure in May of a Massachusetts unemployment office. The jobless rate in December climbed by over 1 point in the state and in Berkshire County. ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

PITTSFIELD — After three months of declines, the Berkshire County unemployment rate is back to its highest level since September.

The county's unemployment rate rose by more than 1 percentage point, from 6.6 percent in November to 7.8 percent last month, according to state figures released Tuesday. The local increase corresponds with a rise in the state rate from 6.2 percent to 7.1 percent in December, according to seasonally unadjusted figures that were released by the state [Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development](#).

Although the national unemployment rate remained steady at 6.7 percent last month, the jobless rates in all 24 of the state's labor market areas also rose in December, according to Heather Boulger, executive director of the [MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board](#) in Pittsfield.

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— Heather Boulger, executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield

"I think we're seeing now that COVID is having a tremendous impact on employment," Boulger said. "Typically, the numbers jump in January. We anticipate the seasonal year-end bump up, but COVID is very different for our workforce right now."

The number of Berkshire residents collecting jobless benefits jumped by almost 800 last month, to 4,773, after falling below 4,000 in November for the first time since March. That number is significant, because the county's total labor force and number of employed workers increased in December.

"In December, we lost 200 job opportunities, and there's 800 more people unemployed than in November," Boulger said. "So, I don't know if companies are continuing to furlough and lay folks off or if companies have closed. I think it's directly related to the pandemic. I don't know 100 percent what the reason is.

"It was going in the right direction, and for some reason in December it seems we've had a bigger impact," she said. "I would anticipate the numbers would be similar in January, when they come out."

Among the Berkshires' 33 municipalities, unemployment rates ranged from a low of 2.1 percent in Alford to a high of 10.1 percent in Savoy last month. In the Berkshires' two cities, the unemployment rates jumped from 7.1 percent to 9.3 percent in North Adams, and from 8.0 percent to 9.0 percent in Pittsfield.

The jobless rates in both cities were in double digits from April to September, longer than the county rate, which remained in that area from April to August. Unemployment in the Great Barrington workforce area jumped from 4.6 percent to 5.7 percent in December, as the number of unemployed residents increased by 144, from 480 to 624.

On the plus side, there were 2,800 job postings in the Berkshires on the state's Job Quest website Tuesday, up from the 1,900 that were posted when the state released November's local unemployment figures late last month. With the exception of hospitality and leisure, most Berkshire employment sectors currently have job openings, according to the Workforce Board.

Boulger said those who are struggling and want to get back into the workforce can find information on training programs or workshops at [MassHireBerkshireCC.com](http://MassHireBerkshireCC.com), or by calling the [MassHire Berkshire Career Center](#) in Pittsfield.

"Although they're still virtual, they'll get back to people, so, just leave a message," she said.

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