

Berkshire County unemployment rate drops below 10% for first time in six months

- By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle
- Oct 20, 2020



A shopper walks by a vacant retail space in September in Freeport, Maine. The unemployment rate in Berkshire County has fallen below double digits for the first time in six months.

Robert F. Bukaty — The Associated Press

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PITTSFIELD — For the first time in six months, the Berkshire County unemployment rate is back in single digits.

The local jobless rate dropped almost 2 full percentage points in September, to 9.2 percent, the first time it has been below 10 percent since March, according to figures released Tuesday by a state agency.

The total Berkshire labor force increased by about 3,000 residents, while 4,000 more were employed in September than in August, according to the state Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. The number of Berkshire residents collecting unemployment benefits dropped by 832, to 5,927, the lowest since the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect the local economy in April.

The county's jobless rate is slightly below the state's unemployment rate of 9.5 percent, but it remains higher than the national rate, which dropped to 7.9 percent last month.

The economic hardships brought on by the pandemic caused the Berkshire unemployment rate to hit a high of 16.7 percent in April. The rate has been dropping steadily since June — it fell 5 percentage points in August, to 11 percent. Based on last month's numbers, Shannon Zayac, the industrial relations manager for the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield, said she is "cautiously optimistic" that the local economy is headed on the right track.

"The numbers are rising for COVID again throughout the country, but we have strong leadership and we kind of know what to do now," Zayac said. "We know how to keep everyone safe as long as we keep doing the correct things. So, we're going to keep stepping forward and not going back."

“That we’re under 10 percent for the first time in six months is awesome,” she said. “Even more key is that the labor force is back above even what it was [at this time] last year. More people are getting back into the workforce.”

The county’s total labor force, which includes employed and unemployed workers, might be slightly above where it was at this time last year, but the Berkshire unemployment rate in September 2019 was three times lower, at 3 percent.

Unemployment in the Berkshires’ two cities still is in double digits, but it dropped 2 percentage points in Pittsfield, to 11.2 percent, and just over 2 percentage points in North Adams, to 10.7 percent, last month. In Pittsfield, the jobless rate was 19.9 percent in June and 19.2 percent in July, while unemployment in North Adams was 18 percent three months ago.

The jobless rate in the Pittsfield metropolitan area, which includes municipalities in the Central Berkshires, dropped from 11.8 percent to 9.9 percent in September as the number of workers collecting jobless benefits fell by over 600, to 4,180. The unemployment rate dropped to 7.0 percent from 8.5 percent in September in the Great Barrington workforce area, and from 10.4 percent to 8.8 percent in the North Adams area, which includes a portion of Vermont.

There were 1,972 job vacancies listed on the Berkshires’ four job portals Tuesday. The county’s job vacancy rate is 5.1 percent, slightly higher than the state rate of 4.8 percent. Although more local residents are reentering the workforce, 42 percent of Berkshire companies still have persistent job vacancies that include positions in teaching and nursing, engineers and management professionals.

### Trending down

Here is a look at the unemployment rates in the Berkshires for 2020:

September: **9.2 percent**

August: **11.0 percent**

July: **16.0 percent**

June: **16.5 percent**

May: **15.8 percent**

April: **16.7 percent**

March: **3.9 percent**

February: **4.3 percent**

January: **4.4 percent**