

The Berkshire Eagle



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Heather Boulger | Inside the Job Market: A month to give thanks

Posted Thursday, November 21, 2019 12:42 pm

By Heather Boulger

PITTSFIELD — 'Tis the season to be grateful. For many, the month of November provides us with an opportunity to show our appreciation and thankfulness for our friends, family members and loved ones. For some, however, gratitude can be challenging to find when there are so many people to help, so many meetings to attend, so many deadlines, so many obligations, so much daily stress, and just not enough time in the day.

One of my goals for this hectic time of year is to take time each day to count my blessings, identify what I am thankful for and to pay it forward.

The Berkshire County unemployment rate is 3.2 percent. That's good news for the local economy, with 65,271 people in the labor force and 63,165 people employed. It is our goal at MassHire to help the 2,106 unemployed county residents and those looking for career changes to connect them to the myriad workforce programs to find their perfect employment opportunity here in the Berkshires.

As of Nov. 14, there were 1,364 job postings in the Berkshires on the JobQuest website and hundreds more posted on other venues. For an overview of local workforce services and employment opportunities, visit MassHireBerkshire.com.

Remember our veterans

Pay it forward this November by thanking a veteran. We are able to celebrate our blessings and freedoms because of their sacrifices.

There are 9,294 military veterans living in the Berkshires. The labor force participation rate for veterans in the Berkshires is 72 percent, and their unemployment rate is 9.8 percent. Twenty-eight percent of local veterans have a disability. There are 1,424 veteran-owned firms in the Berkshires as well.

The MassHire Berkshire Career Center provides priority of service to veterans, and can help access employment and training opportunities. Massachusetts employers that hire a veteran may be eligible for a federal tax credit. Let's show our veterans that we appreciate their sacrifices each and every day.

Think small

Support our small businesses all year long, too. There are 3,868 commercial establishments in Berkshire County, and 88 percent are considered to be small businesses. These firms employ more than 53,000 people. When we support small businesses, jobs are created and local communities preserve or develop a unique culture. The money spent at small businesses also stays local because it goes back into the local economy.

Retailers will be spending this week preparing for Small Business Saturday, which takes place the day after Black Friday.

It's shaping up to be a holly, jolly holiday shopping season, according to the National Retail Federation's annual holiday spending forecast. The NRF predicts that consumers will spend 4 percent more this holiday season, with an average of \$1,047.83 per consumer. Shoppers between the ages of 35 and 44 plan to spend the most, at \$1,158.63.

Consumers are expected to spend an average of \$659 on gifts, including \$227 on nongift holiday items like food, decorations, flowers and greeting cards, and \$162 on nongift purchases that take advantage of deals and promotions.

Here are some other statistics:

- 91 percent of consumers plan to celebrate the winter holidays this year;
- 73 percent of consumers plan to use their smartphone or tablet to research or make a purchase;
- 19 percent of consumers are early bird shoppers who started in September or earlier;
- 39 percent of shoppers began making their holiday purchases Nov. 1.

Retail opportunities

Retail is the second-largest job sector in the Berkshires, employing 8,587 people, which is 14.1 percent of the county's total workforce. Retail is also one of the county's most technically advanced and innovative sectors, offering varied and rewarding career possibilities.

Although sales jobs are most closely associated with the retail sector, 44 percent of those employed in that area do not hold sales positions. There are accountants, artists, computer programmers, merchandise displayers, architects and engineers, protective workers and more. So, if you want an engaging, competitive career ... consider a job in the retail industry.

The majority of retailers are small businesses — 71 percent of retail stores have fewer than 10 employees, according to the NRF. The industry as a whole supports one of every four jobs in the United States. Half of all employed teenagers work in the retail sector. More than one-third of retail employees work part time, and 60 percent of them are women.

Retail stores account for 70 percent of the country's gross national product. And despite the rise in online shopping opportunities, industry research indicates that 90 percent of U.S. retail sales still take place in bricks-and-mortar locations.

Berkshire County knows firsthand the importance of the holiday season for our local retailers, so, please shop local this holiday season.

Thanksgiving falls at an opportune time on the calendar. We are heading into the holiday season, when we are reminded of what is most important to us. We will soon be approaching the end of the year, when we take stock of the past year and set goals for the coming one. We can all find more room for gratitude in both our personal and professional lives. This is a perfect time of year to translate our feelings of thankfulness into daily practice and to thank our veterans and support our small businesses.

Heather Boulger is the executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield.