

Berkshire County unemployment rate falls to 6.9%; thousands remain jobless

By Scott Stafford, The Berkshire Eagle

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Heather Boulger, executive director of the Berkshire Workforce Board, on new unemployment figures: “The rate is definitely trending in the right direction. It’s good, but there are still more than 4,200 people that we’re trying to re-skill and re-employ.”

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The unemployment rate for October has come in at 6.9 percent for Berkshire County and 8.4 percent for Pittsfield. While that’s a big improvement over levels last spring, an official notes that the rate does not reflect some who also are out of work.

Those figures compare with an [unemployment](#) rate that was 2.6 percent for Berkshire County in October 2019.

“The rate is definitely trending in the right direction,” said Heather Boulger, executive director of the Berkshire Workforce Board. “It’s good, but there are still more than 4,200 people that we’re trying to re-skill and re-employ.”

She noted that the unemployment rate doesn’t reflect a number of others who are out of work, such as those who are unemployed but their circumstances keep them from applying for state unemployment insurance and instead are receiving pandemic unemployment aid. There also are people who have dropped out of the labor force, and some who retired early as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Boulger said those uncounated as unemployed would add an additional 2.5 to 3.5 percent to the county unemployment rate.

Before the pandemic hit, the county was considered to be at full employment, meaning that if someone was seeking work, there was a job waiting for them, Boulger said.

A couple of things to take into account, she noted, is that October, November and December normally have lower unemployment rates because of seasonal employment for the holidays. In January and February, those jobs tend to disappear, so the unemployment might swell a bit. And with the surge of COVID-19 cases throughout the area, any further restrictions also could drive the rate back up.

At its height in April and May, the unemployment rate in Berkshire County was 15 to 18 percent, or “rock bottom,” as Boulger put it.

The good news is that there are “hundreds, maybe thousands, of local companies hiring today,” she said.

Figures provided by the state show that there were 2,036 Berkshire County jobs open at the end of October, with 45 percent of them in the professional category and 55 percent being technical, entry or part-time work.

[Pittsfield](#)'s rate shrank to 8.4 percent from 11.4 percent in September, with 1,686 people out of work.

In [North Adams](#), the rate dropped from 10.8 percent in September to 8.2 percent in October, showing 482 residents as unemployed.

The most job gains came in hospitality and professional/business services. Retail, health care/social assistance and manufacturing also saw job growth.

Boulger said the Berkshire Career Center, while closed to the public because of the pandemic, still is functioning, providing remote services such as skills training, resume writing and other workshops online at [MassHireBerkshireCC.com](https://www.masshireberkshirecc.com).