

Berkshire Eagle – By Larry Parnass, Nov 20, 2021

What is Project Paycheck?

The Berkshire Eagle’s Project Paycheck explores work life changes in the region driven by the coronavirus pandemic. Led by Investigations Editor Larry Parnass, it probes why Berkshire County’s workforce remains at its smallest size in decades — and what that means for the region’s economic well-being.

If the Berkshires economy was a rave, I’d expect to see Jonathan Butler there at the door, super festive, inviting everyone in as the top guy at [1Berkshire](#) (“The Home of Business”). But, when the mood more resembles a wake, as it does some days now, Butler doubles as a therapist.

His clients?

They are local companies whose managers, these days, have “issues.” Well, one main one: jobs to fill, but not enough people to take them. I asked Butler the other day how often people come to him with that complaint.

“Hundreds,” he told me. “Problem one in the last six to eight months is just that. We can’t get people to come back to work.”

Please allow me to oversimplify: The coronavirus pandemic cut the supply of workers for a lot of reasons I’ll explore in this series, which we’re calling Project Paycheck. Over the next few months, with

your help and ideas, I'll be poking around the jobs beat in Berkshire County. I'll be filing informal dispatches several times a week, a mix of news, impressions, observations, links — and, I hope, contributions from readers.

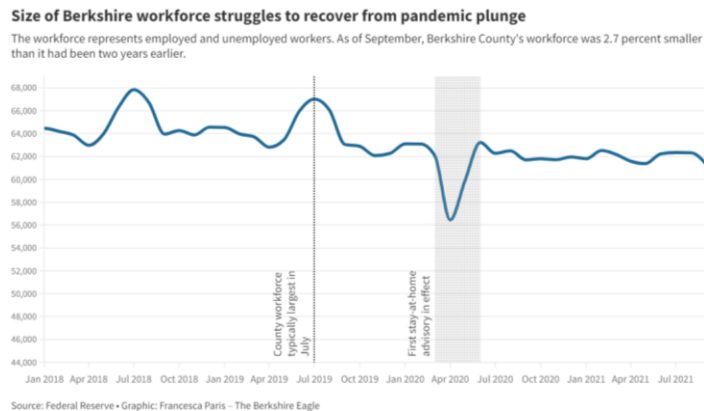
Here is why we are shining a light on this issue: As with any region, the strength, and resilience, of the Berkshire economy depends on people working and getting paid.

Let's back up a year. The local economics story of 2020 was this: Pandemic. Layoffs. Loans. Business closings. Unemployment benefits.

The largely untold economic story of 2021: All that dislocation might have broken the mold on how people view work. Now that the economy is improving, Berkshire employers are eager to ramp up.

▫ But, they struggle, mightily, to find help.

In July 2019, 67,019 people were working or officially unemployed in Berkshire County. This past July, that number was 4,675 lower. By September, it shrank an additional 1,025. That is not super significant, because July is always when the largest number of people are working in Berkshire County, thanks to tourism.



On a graph of the Berkshire workforce, July's bump typically comes like clockwork. A perky heartbeat.

This July, it reached only 62,344, below even February's numbers. Memorial Day, you'll recall, was supposed to be a new start for the state, as Gov. Charlie Baker dropped restrictions on pandemic

gatherings. But, then, the delta variant of the coronavirus hit the Northeast, and the pandemic pall was back.

Butler says employers are seeing things that make them hopeful, including an increase not only in applicants (after September's end to expanded jobless benefits), but in their "quality."

And still.

"It hasn't moved the needle very much," he told me.

Signs of these times

Surely you've seen all the help wanted signs. On a drive around Pittsfield last week, I conducted a nonscientific survey, which is a thing in journalism — and that's OK, in my view, as long as you tell people you were just driving around taking notes and pictures, your dog Charlie riding shotgun.

At the Sugar Hill Senior Living Community in Dalton, the lawn is neatly mown, but inside, they sorely need certified nursing assistants and cooks. A \$3,000 signing bonus awaits new CNAs.

On North Street, Carr Hardware isn't flashing a bankroll, but its message, right in the front window, is meant to be so, so convenient. "We've been looking for you!" a sign reads. "Text CARRHIRE to 2210 to apply directly from your phone in minutes."

Are people really doing that? Bart Raser, Carr's co-owner, says yes. "The kids tend to do it," he said this week when I called. There actually is a double incentive, since Carr uses an internal referral program. He says the company's younger employees (nearly 120 people work for Carr at its various stores) text the texting code to friends.

I asked Raser how many openings he has. Slight pause. It's complicated, he says. Carr's strategy is to hire people based on their skills and qualities, not just to plug a shift. "Whether we have an opening or not. We are always looking for good people." But, yeah, they have about a dozen openings as of this week. "It's been challenging. We've been blessed because we have a lot of core people who've been with us for some time."

At Liberty Pizza on North Street, the recruiting call is homemade. No fancy-schmancy graphics department here. A sheet of paper taped to the glass door reads, “HELP Wanted.” That’s big block letters on “HELP,” neatly colored in blue, its prominence an SOS.

Send help.

My survey says: Human services agencies are particularly hard hit by this moment of shortage. Places that fix cars, too. And restaurants and retail. “We’re Hiring/Estamos Contratando” reads a banner — several, actually — tied to a chain-link fence at Tractor Supply Co. at 898 Crane Ave.

The signs look weathered. Many are slickly produced and printed on durable material. Someone expects them to be there for a while.

Jobs take a clicking

Last week, I peeked in on the yearly “multi-industry” job fair hosted by the MassHire Berkshire Career Center. (“The big one,” Melanie Herzig, MassHire’s business service rep, says of the event; smaller sessions are held for specific kinds of jobs.)

Though the [MassHire office](#) is open again on the third floor at 160 North St., companies and candidates gathered online for this one. (I’ll share a report on how it went in a few days.)

For now, here is the bottom line: Employers in Berkshire County have more openings than an amateur comedy night.

The Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Stockbridge was on hand recruiting for 16 positions. Berkshire Service Group was scouting for 15 direct-care workers for jobs that pay \$33,963 to \$42,949 a year. The human services nonprofit ServiceNet listed 33 openings around the region.

The virtual meeting platform lets employers know who clicks on their info. Lacey Woodrum, of ServiceNet, shot me this cheery message: “Hello! Thank you for stopping by ServiceNet! We have multiple positions across the agency for Residential Care; counselors, managers, and per diem counselors!

We are also hiring for Nursing, Clinicians, Admin positions and IT! Do you have any questions I may be able to answer for you?”

At Berkshire Health Systems, the need for workers runs the salary gamut, from CNAs and medical assistants to staff nurses (\$77,000 to \$97,000) to a director of imaging technology (\$120,000 or more).

The whys and wherefores

I asked Butler, the county’s business guru, to explain what he thinks is going on. Beyond the simple matter of supply and demand, that is.

I brought that same question to Laura Brennan, economic development program manager for the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, and to Heather P. Boulger, executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board.

I found them quite wise on the wherefores.

The enormity of the problem, which is felt around the country, has them all mining for answers.

“There are a wide range of explanations that together help us understand that drop in the labor force,” Brennan told me.

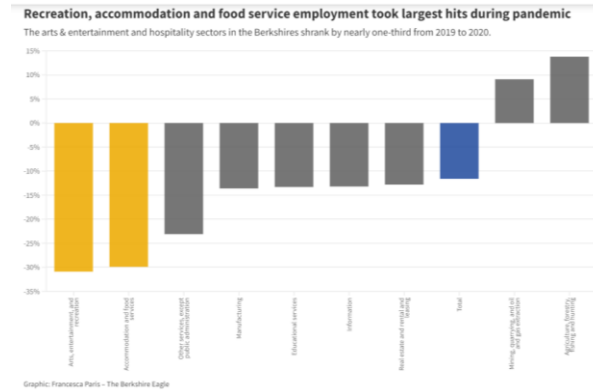
So, let’s tick them off. (I’ll [tackle one below](#), but you can find seven more takeaways in a companion story.)

The pandemic connection is real, they all believe, and that started with the jobs crater of April 2020, when the Berkshire County civilian employment number fell by 6,647 in just two months — and that even counts people on unemployment.

“There were places that simply shut down,” Brennan recalled. It left people with a choice: go on unemployment “or exit the labor force.”

The exodus, some of it the result of business closings and layoffs, hit nearly everywhere. Desperate local employers, including The Berkshire Eagle, rushed local banks to apply for those federal Paycheck

Protection Program loans. My reporting colleague, Francesca Paris, created a searchable database that still lets people look back on who got what. (In all, the program made 2,314 loans worth \$223 million to borrowers with 25,000 employees.)



No surprise: The pandemic flattened employment in 2020 in fields where people gather — restaurants and hospitality (down 29.9 percent in Berkshire County, comparing 2019 with 2020), and arts and entertainment (down 30.9 percent).

Those are dramatic numbers, right? Percentages are abstract, though. In 2020, 2,147 fewer people were working in restaurants and hotels. And 604 people were working in arts and entertainment.

Are you one of those folks? How did you get through the year — and what are you doing now?