



Pittsfield's Elk Lodge, located on Union Street, was one of the many businesses forced to shut down as part of COVID-19 related bans.

JAKE MENDEL - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Berkshires brace as jobless claims skyrocket

Posted Thursday, March 19, 2020 6:20 pm

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By Jake Mendel, The Berkshire Eagle

A typical month comes with roughly 17,000 unemployment claims in the commonwealth of Massachusetts. Tuesday alone, there were about 23,000 claims made, according to Heather Boulger, the executive director of the [MassHire Berkshire Workforce](#) board.

"We are doing everything humanly possible to help those impacted by this nasty [COVID-19] virus," Boulger said. "We are trying to get services going efficiently and effectively, while protecting our customers and employees.

"I don't know anyone who isn't impacted by this, and we understand that people are frustrated online," she said. "The big thing is we understand the sense of urgency, but we are asking for a little patience while the state gears up. The hope is to have [systems] up by the end of the week."

Gov. Charlie Baker announced Sunday that there will be a three-week ban on all dine-in restaurants and bars, along with gatherings of 25-plus people to counter the virus.

'Hurts all the local clubs'

"This really hurts all the local clubs, like the Italian, Polish and Elks," Michael Filpi, owner of [Meatball Mike's Home Catering service](#), said. "Their bread and butter are 30- to 50-person parties."

Filpi, a retired construction worker, opened his catering service about three years ago and operates out of the Elks Lodge at 27 Union St. in Pittsfield. His staff usually includes his wife and son, but bigger events can call for up to eight employees.

"We still have to pay bills, like meals tax, payroll and for our truck and trailer," Filpi said. "On paper, we lost 22 percent of our booked income for the year, because we aren't sure if people will re-book."

The catering service is set up as a LLC, and Filpi said all profits are re-invested into the business.

"We need to be in a health board-certified kitchen to cook, and we aren't set up for takeout food," Filpi said. "These clubs are feeling the brunt of this, because the bottom line isn't as big as other venues. We usually do in-house parties or at a lodge."

Unplanned time off

Local bars are also in a tough situation, especially those with the inability to offer food to-go.

"I was pretty nervous [when the ban was announced]," said Zach Morris, a bartender at Thistle and Mirth, located at 44 West St. in Pittsfield. "I am out of the only job I have for three weeks. I am concerned for other restaurants; who knows if they can bounce back.

"[Joad Bowman, the owner of the bar, and I], decided that we were going to let things play out for a few days before deciding on a plan."

For Morris, this is the first time he has had at least three consecutive days off in two years.

"I've been trying to stay off my phone and have gone hiking every day," Morris said. "I've been able to relax a little bit, but this is so tough for those having to pay rent or take care of kids."

While practicing social distancing in the mountains, Morris has gotten to focus on photography, one of his passions. Morris won [Downtown Pittsfield Inc.'s photo contest last year with his photo titled "Tropical Pittsfield."](#)

Despite the free time, Morris said he plans to use the rest of the week trying to apply for unemployment and plans to look into the the [U.S. Bartenders Guild](#) and their [Bartender Emergency Assistance Program](#).

The ban has affected local gyms and stores, too, which are shutting their doors; as a result, a wave of unemployment claims have been filed.

Unemployment claims

Those looking to file unemployment insurance claims must head to [mass.gov](#).

Not only is it the most up-to-date source, but it helps companies determine if they're available for work services and includes resources such as [recovery loans and MEMA's Emergency Operations Center's Private Sector Hotline](#).

"Our office has been in constant contact with the Office of Development and Labor, along with Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency," Boulger said. "The state is trying to develop the call center virtually to assist claims coming in."

Locally, the Berkshire Workforce Development Board's office is closed, but the employees are working remotely and can be reached via call or email.

"Because this is new to everyone, including state employees, it will take the state a little time to ramp up to the large number of requests," Boulger said. "We will try our hardest to get back to people as timely as possible."

The ban is scheduled to last three weeks, but an extension is possible as new information regarding COVID-19 comes to light. Be sure to bookmark [The Berkshire Eagle's homepage](#), which will regularly update with the latest news on the virus.

"I wish we had a crystal ball," Filpi said. "We are going to wait and see how long the ban is going to be. We already have bookings in April, May and June. Those who recently canceled events may try to reschedule with us, but if the date is booked, they may go somewhere else."

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