

In Berkshires, a promising uptick in employment in May

- By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle
- Jun 26, 2020 Updated Sep 17, 2020



Rachel Piccolo brings some drinks to customers this month at the Heritage Tavern in Lenox, on the first day of outdoor dining under phase two of the state's COVID-19 reopening plan. Local unemployment fell from 16.7 percent in April to 15.6 percent in May, according to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Berkshire unemployment now is lower than the state unemployment rate of 16.3 percent.

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**PITTSFIELD** — Steps to reopen the economy in May sent the Berkshire jobless rate down a point for the month. But, it remains in double figures, a month after the region recorded the highest jobless rate in at least 22 years.

Local unemployment fell from 16.7 percent in April to 15.6 percent in May, according to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Berkshire unemployment now is lower than the state unemployment rate of 16.3 percent.

The national unemployment rate fell from 14.7 percent in April to 13.3 percent last month.

In the county's two cities, gains were mixed. The unemployment rate in North Adams dropped almost 2 percentage points last month, from 18.7 percent to 16.9 percent, but fell by less than half a percentage point in Pittsfield, from 19.0 percent to 18.6 percent.

The state adjusted the April unemployment numbers after they were released in May because the original figures only went through April 18, according to Heather Boulger, executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board.

Under the original figures, Pittsfield's unemployment rate for April was listed at 18.8 percent, and the county rate was 16.6 percent.

For May, the number of Berkshire residents receiving jobless benefits dropped by just over 300, to 9,300, while the number of employed increased by about 2,000, to 50,191.

Those figures don't include county residents who have received federal pandemic unemployment benefits, which Boulger estimated at 22,000 to 25,000.

The county's labor force also jumped in May, by about 2,000 residents, to 59,491, which is almost 8 percent lower than last year. Also, the current labor force is 3,000 less than when the coronavirus pandemic began to shut down the economy in March. It also is 5,000 lower than at the beginning of the calendar year, and down almost 8,000 from the height of the summer tourist season last July, according to state figures.

"Some of that is due to people going back to work," Boulger said, referring to the monthly increase. "For those folks, the ban was lifted. Some offices, restaurants, even some health care and dental offices have started to reopen."

Boulger said she was surprised that the employment picture is better in the Berkshires than across the state. "Typically with recessions, the Berkshires are slower to get into them and slower to get out. I'm wondering if that is going to be the case with COVID-19."

According to a consultant hired to study the pandemic's effects on the Berkshire workforce, 7,705 local jobs were lost because of the pandemic, which affected 15.3 percent of the local workforce. The study linked that to a \$52 million decline in the county's overall output for the month of April, Boulger said.

"We're hoping, now that we're starting to reopen, that many companies that took advantage of the Paycheck Protection Program will be bringing back those jobs over the next 15 to 18 months," she said.

"I think it's going to take a little bit of time to bounce back," Boulger said. "In the next 15 to 18 months, if we're not at full capacity, we'll be much closer than we are."

In North Adams, the number of unemployed dropped to 974 residents from 1,061 in April, while the number of employed increased by almost 200, from 4,619 to 4,805.

In Pittsfield, the number of unemployed workers dropped by 53 in May, to 3,642, while the number of employed rose to 16,157 from 15,547.

North Adams Mayor Thomas Bernard said he hadn't viewed his city's most recent job numbers in detail but said he was pleased that they were trending upward.

"I haven't seen the sectors where we saw the most growth and progress, but I think it would be in some of those services that started to open up earliest as we went into phase one in May," he said, referring to Gov. Charlie Baker's reopening scheme. "Hopefully, as we see more sectors opening up, those numbers will continue to come down. I think it will be slower and we'll be particularly vulnerable if we have any kind of negative trends on the health indicators."

Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyer could not be reached for comment.

Boulger said she didn't know why the rebound was stronger in North Adams than in Pittsfield last month, but she said five Berkshire companies were required to file notices with the federal government because they had to lay off at least 100 employees.

Those companies included Crane Stationery in North Adams, and the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Stockbridge.

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