

Jobless rate ticks up in Berkshires, but still below April's peak

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By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — The state is continuing to reopen from the COVID-19 pandemic, but the local unemployment rate is going up, not down.

After falling to 15.8 percent in May from a peak of 16.7 percent in April — that was the highest rate recorded in the Berkshires in at least 22 years, according to state figures — the Berkshire unemployment rate rose almost half a percentage point, to 16.2 percent, in June as more than 10,000 county residents now are receiving jobless benefits, according to state figures that were released Tuesday.

The Berkshire rate remained lower than the state rate, which rose a full percentage point, to 17.5 percent, in June. The national unemployment rate is 11.1 percent.

The increase in unemployed Berkshire residents — up 846 workers, to 10,337 last month — was offset in June by the addition of about 4,000 workers to the county's total labor force, and an additional 3,100 to the ranks of the employed. The number of unemployed county residents does not include those receiving pandemic employment benefits, a program that is scheduled to end this week.

The effect that the coronavirus has had on the local economy can best be assessed by comparing the numbers from 12 months ago. The county's total labor force is down 5.1 percent from June 2019, the number of employed has dropped by 17.7 percent and the number of unemployed has jumped by 8,000 workers, an increase of 343 percent.

The MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield attributes last month's increase in the number of unemployed residents to people

applying for regular jobless benefits after their pandemic benefits might have ended, and people who previously lost their jobs but didn't apply for any benefits until last month.

"We're just capturing more people in the database," said Shannon Zayac, the board's industry relations manager. "Maybe somebody wasn't collecting unemployment and now they are."

On the plus side, Zayac said, the number of job vacancies in the Berkshires has been increasing by about 100 each week. According to JobQuest, 1,549 job vacancies were posted in the Berkshires on Tuesday.

"So, companies are still hiring," she said. "It's not that jobs aren't there, it's just that some people may be afraid to go to work or have lost their job and are maybe waiting a little to see if their job comes back."

A drawback to this trend is that 42 percent of Berkshire companies are reporting persistent job vacancies, according to the Berkshire Workforce Board. Those positions include engineers, residential support, laborers, management professionals, technicians, teachers, nurses and tellers.

The same pattern between the employed and unemployed in the county's jobless rates also appeared in the June rates for the county's two cities, which jumped from 17 to 17.7 percent in North Adams and from 18.8 percent to 19.6 percent in Pittsfield.

In Great Barrington, South County's largest town, the unemployment rate rose two-tenths of a percentage point, to 16.2 percent.

Neither North Adams Mayor Thomas Bernard nor Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyer returned calls seeking comment.

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