

Berkshire Edge March 22, 2021



Lee Audio 'N Security president Rick Gore shows a panel he uses in training new apprentice employees. Photo courtesy Lee Audio 'N Security

BUSINESS

BUSINESS MONDAY: Despite high unemployment, Berkshire businesses can't find help

Berkshire businesses struggle to find workers despite high unemployment.

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According to the U.S. Labor Department's [most recent weekly unemployment insurance claims report](#), 770,000 first-time claims were filed in the United States last week. While that pales in comparison to the [nearly 3.3 million claims filed this time last year](#), it represents a 6 percent increase in jobless benefit requests from the week prior.

When compared to pre-pandemic reports, the new unemployment claims statistic looks especially high. The Labor Department reported 202,000 claims filed the week of March 30, 2019, the lowest number recorded since December 6, 1969.

Unemployment in the Berkshires remains especially high, reaching 8.8 percent this January as compared to 7.5 percent statewide and 6.3 percent in the U.S.



“What this means is that 5,800 people in the Berkshires are collecting regular unemployment insurance,” said Heather Boulger, executive director of the [MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board](#). This doesn’t include freelancers, independent contractors, and self-employed workers who are receiving Pandemic Unemployment Assistance.

Even though thousands of Berkshire residents still find themselves without work, some businesses are struggling to hire new employees.

[Lee Audio 'N Security](#), an electrical systems company, has several open positions currently posted but company president Rick Gore is having trouble finding candidates. “We were already having an issue with hiring, but COVID made it worse,” he said. “We’ve been surprised at how hard it’s been.”

A report commissioned by the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board **last June** identified industries that were hardest hit by the pandemic's onset—including specialty trade contractors—but a follow-up report, set to be released in the coming weeks, predicts that certain sectors including education, healthcare, agriculture, and trades will continue to struggle.

“Every industry sector has been impacted by the pandemic,” said Boulger. “But some have fallen into crisis mode.”

“We used to get more applications from people who might not be qualified,” said D. Justin Mooney, business manager at Lee Audio ‘N Security. Much of the company’s business involves installation and maintenance of security alarm and monitoring systems, which require technicians with a class D license to perform. Younger people aren’t licensed at that level, he said, and the closest class D training program is in Worcester.

Lee Audio ‘N Security offers apprenticeship training on-site and **McCann Technical School** in North Adams trains electrical program students for a class B journeyman license, but many of these students are “sucked up” by larger companies in the region.

“General Dynamics offered one of our apprentices a job for a starting salary of \$80,000,” said Gore. “That’s what we’re up against.”

These days, Gore and Mooney aren’t receiving any applications for the installer and technician jobs that are open. In addition to competitive benefits such as healthcare, retirement, paid vacations, personal time, and tuition

reimbursement, they have instituted a new \$1,000 hiring bonus to lure interested candidates.

“Maybe \$1,000 isn’t enough,” said Gore. “People make more money sitting at home.”

Kat Lockridge, co-owner of **Classical Tents and Party Goods**, agrees that unemployment complacency is a problem. “People are waiting as long as possible to work,” she said. “I’m not speculating; I’ve seen it and heard it.”



Seasonal tent directors with Classical Tents and Party Goods install a tent rental on-site for a client. Photo courtesy Classical Tents and Party Goods

Lockridge has begun hiring multiple positions for the rental season, which will begin next month, including four workers from Puerto Rico that she secured through a placement service. This, however, was not a reaction to pandemic-related workforce issues.

“The availability of seasonal help has diminished for years,” she said.

Lockridge previously used the **H-2B visa program** to recruit temporary workers from Guatemala after seeing low morale and work ethic from local laborers.

But she has more linen room and dish room positions to fill this year, and is concerned about new barriers that may hamper hiring.

Boulger explained that the pandemic has created motivational problems given the continued availability of unemployment assistance as well as concerns about childcare, uncertainty about hybrid education, and fear of exposure to the virus. Some workers are waiting for companies to reopen or part-time jobs to turn into full-time jobs.

“We understand their frustrations, but we hope that people can get vaccinated and back to work as soon as possible,” she said.

The good news is that, according to Boulger’s latest COVID-19 economic impact report, 74 percent of jobs lost in the Berkshires due to the pandemic have already been recovered. “The report predicts that all lost jobs will be recovered by the third quarter of 2022, although this doesn’t take into account businesses that closed permanently,” she said.

She sees these data points as proof that Berkshire County’s workforce is heading in the right direction.

“We’re optimistic because there are job opportunities in the Berkshires,” she said. “Some of our hospitality sectors and educational partners have attracted

out-of-state workers to come here. There are a lot of incentives for on-the-job training, and businesses are finding creative ways to attract workers. There are strong career pathways at high schools and in-person internships are still happening.”

Ultimately, Boulger believes that the pandemic will end—eventually. “Don’t sit on your laurels for the next few months,” she cautioned. “We don’t want people to wait until the jobs are gone.”