

March 17, 2020 – COVID-19 Workforce Update.

At the Berkshire Workforce Board, we understand that the COVID-19 caused tremendous uncertainty both at work and in our daily lives. We recognize the major implications that COVID-19 is having on the organizations we support, their own staff members, and their stakeholders. We also know that we are only starting to understand the longer-term effects.

Over the past 24-hours we have participated in numerous calls with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD); among others and we wanted to share some important reminders and guidance:

- Adhering to state guidance, the MassHire **Berkshire Workforce Board offices are closed** and staff are working remotely until further notice. All meetings will be conducted via video conferencing and all phone messages and emails will be returned promptly.
- All **in-person services are currently unavailable at all Career Center and unemployment walk-in centers**. The MassHire Berkshire Career Center was closed March 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> and will remain closed to the public until further notice. Services at the North Adams Library have been suspended. Center management will be establishing a strategy to assist in providing services remotely.
- **Unemployment Assistance** - Online unemployment services to process unemployment claims are still available at [www.mass.gov/dua](http://www.mass.gov/dua). Please note that yesterday 23,000 claims were filed in one day (the average is 17,000/month). Please know that Department of Unemployment Assistance is ramping up staffing and technology to address the anticipated continued influx of claims.
- **Guidance for Businesses** – there are resources for businesses
  - small business recovery loan fund;
  - MEMA’s emergency operations center’s private sector hotline;
  - SBA Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program;
  - Emergency order regarding gatherings of more than 25 and restaurants and bars;
  - and Executive Office of Labor & Workforce Development available here: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-resources-and-guidance-for-businesses>
- **Grant funded training programs** – All Manufacturing and Healthcare grant training programs have been suspended. All participants have been notified and we are exploring virtual ways to continue the training.

### **Unemployment Resources** –

- all requirements regarding attending seminars at MassHire Centers have been suspended.
- Missing deadlines due to effects of COVID-19 will be excused under DUA’s good cause provision.
- All appeal hearings will be held by telephone only.

The Department of Labor issued guidance to the states instructing state agencies to apply existing law flexibly. Under the DOL guidance, DUA may now pay unemployment benefits if a worker is quarantined due to an order by a civil authority or medical professional or leaves employment due to reasonable risk of exposure or infection or to care for a family member and

does not intend to or is not allowed to return to work. The worker need not provide medical documentation and need only be available for work when and as able.

To assist individuals who cannot work due to the impact of COVID-19, the administration is filing emergency legislation that will allow new claims to be paid more quickly by waiving the one week waiting period for unemployment benefits.

EOLWD and DUA are also filing emergency regulations that will allow people impacted by COVID-19 to collect unemployment if their workplace is shut down and expects to reopen in four or fewer weeks. The following conditions apply:

- Workers must remain in contact with their employer during the shutdown.
- Workers must be available for any work their employer may have for them that they are able to do.
- An employer may request to extend the period of the covered shut-down to eight weeks, and workers will remain eligible for the longer period under the same conditions described above.
- If necessary, DUA may extend these time periods for workers and employers.
- Employers who are impacted by COVID-19 may request up to a 60-day grace period to file quarterly reports and pay contributions.
- The pending federal legislation proposes further relief including additional money for unemployment benefits, and relief to employers for charges related to unemployment benefits paid due to COVID-19.

**Additional Resources for your Participants, Partners, and Staff:**

EOLWD also administers a number of programs including the [MassHire BizWorks](https://www.mass.gov/masshire-bizworks) program, <https://www.mass.gov/masshire-bizworks> which is useful for navigating through growth or uncertainty. If you have employer partners seeking to maintain their current workforce, please see the following resources, which you may find helpful:

- [Rapid Response Program - https://www.mass.gov/prevent-layoffs-with-rapid-response](https://www.mass.gov/prevent-layoffs-with-rapid-response)  
The Rapid Response team can offer alternatives to closing a facility and laying off employees. If layoffs are inevitable, measures can be taken to lessen the impact on the company and workforce.
- [WorkShare Program - https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-workshare](https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-workshare)  
If you are experiencing a temporary slowdown in your business, WorkShare can help you reduce your payroll costs and maintain valued workforce.

The Berkshire Workforce Board will continue to streamline this information for job seekers, trainees, and businesses and forward to our partners.

Please let me know if I can be of any assistance as we navigate through this turbulent time together. Be well, hydrate, exercise and breathe. Thank you. Heather