

Business

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More employment, but harder to get there

Berkshire jobless rate drops, but state gas prices continue to rise

By TONY DOBROWOLSKI
The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — More people are employed in Berkshire County this month, but it's getting more expensive for them to get to work.

The Berkshire County unemployment rate dropped slightly in March, but state gas prices have continued to climb, and are now at their highest level since the summer of 2015, according to AAA Northeast.

Local unemployment remained over the 5 percent mark that it reached at the beginning of this year, but it dropped two-tenths of a percentage point last month to 5.1 percent, state authorities announced on Tuesday. The state unemployment rate is 3.8 percent, slightly under the national rate of 4.1 percent.

Meanwhile, state gas prices rose another 7 cents this week and have jumped 19 cents over the past five weeks.

AAA's weekly survey of state gas prices Monday found self-serve regular unleaded averaging \$2.67 per gallon, 9 cents below the national average for that grade of gasoline, but 35 cents higher than it was in Massachusetts 12 months ago.



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A job candidate meets with a resource officer at a recent employment fair at Indiana Wesleyan University. In Berkshire County, the jobless rate dropped slightly in March, but still remained above 5 percent.

"Demand is at record levels for this time of year — more drivers are hitting the road as warmer weather starts to spread across the country," said Mary Maguire, a spokesperson for AAA Northeast. "If the trend of high demand and supply continues, drivers are likely to see pump prices continue to climb as the country settles into spring."

In Berkshire County, the total number of employed workers increased by just over 200 in February to 61,217, while the number of residents receiving jobless benefits dipped by 186 to 3,297, the lowest total so far in 2018, according to figures from the state Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. The county's

total labor force increased by 29 from last month to 64,514, the highest since December. There are also 54 more total employees working in the Berkshires than 12 months ago when the local jobless rate was 5.3 percent.

The unemployment rate in the Great Barrington, North Adams and Pittsfield areas all dropped slightly last month, with the rate in South County falling to 4.9 percent.

In the county's two cities, the unemployment rate dropped three-tenths of a percentage point in Pittsfield to 5.1 percent, and by the same margin in North Adams to 5.7 percent.

There were 1,683 Berkshire County jobs posted on the

2018

March: 5.1 percent
February: 5.3 percent
January: 5.1 percent

2017

December: 3.8 percent
November: 3.5 percent
October: 3.4 percent
September: 3.8 percent
August: 3.8 percent
July: 4.1 percent
June: 4.4 percent
May: 4.4 percent
April: 4.6 percent
March: 5.3 percent

*Source: State Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development

Massachusetts JobQuest site Tuesday, according to the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board. Of those positions, 244 are in sales, 182 for health technicians, and 172 each in management and office support jobs.

Statewide, local unemployment rates decreased in 24 labor market areas in March, while 14 of the 15 areas for which job estimates are published recorded seasonal gains. Over the month employment in the Pittsfield metro area rose by 300 jobs, an increase of 0.7 percent.

Business Editor Tony Dobrowolski can be reached at tdobrowolski@berkshireeagle.com and 413-496-6224.