

Berks County Community Snapshot



United Way of Berks County

This report is provided by United Way of Berks County and designed to provide regular updates to the Berks County community about the changing nature of local economic conditions and resulting human service needs. It will be published on a quarterly basis, and we encourage its distribution to anyone who may have an interest.

Fall 2009

Agencies Field Thousands of Requests for Assistance with Basic Needs

Eight local agencies handled an average of **over 2000 calls per month** from callers requesting help with basic needs over the past three months.

While calls for food assistance still remain high, the quantity of calls is not increasing at the same pace as earlier in the year. Between July and September alone, the Greater Berks Food Bank took 677 calls from residents needing food assistance. In addition, a larger number of county residents are now receiving food stamps, reinforcing that the need for food remains extremely high in our area.

Help with heating and utility bills continues to be one of the most common requests to agencies providing safety net services in our local area. Over the past three months, the Salvation Army received an average of 500 calls per month from people needing assistance paying utility bills. With the winter season approaching, it is expected that these numbers will rise even further. Fortunately, the federal and state supported Low Income Heating and Emergency Assistance Program (LIHEAP) will be available beginning November 2nd.

Since June, a need that experienced sharp growth in the past few months was clothing, especially for children and youth returning to school. The past three months saw a 100% increase in calls to agencies with requests for clothing assistance. In September alone, Catholic Charities took 49 calls with this request.

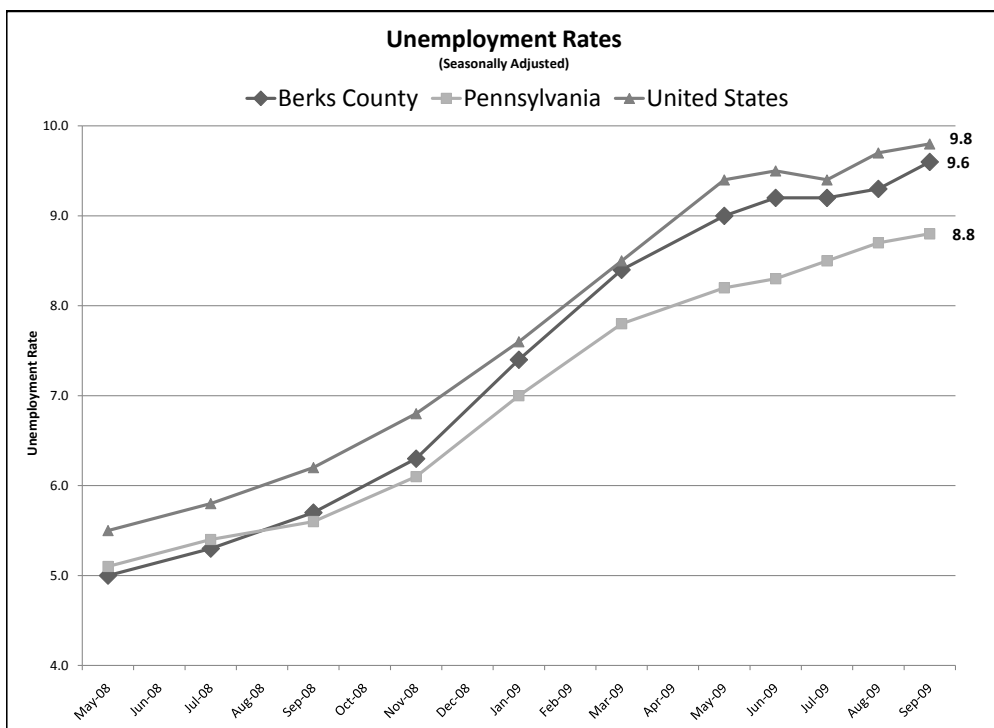
Agencies tracking data for this Community Snapshot include Berks Community Action Program, Berks TALKLINE, Catholic Charities, Friend, Inc., Greater Berks Food Bank, Jewish Family Service, The Salvation Army: Reading Corps, and United Way of Berks County.

Berks County's Unemployment Rate Remains Among Worst in State

Of the fourteen major labor market areas in Pennsylvania, Berks County's September unemployment rate of 9.6 was surpassed only by WilliamSPORT at 10.0 and Erie at 9.9.

Berks County's unemployment rate rose by three-tenths of a percentage point since August, the 11th rate increase over the past twelve month period. The County's rate continues to remain below the national rate of 9.8%, but exceeds the state rate of 8.8% for September, 2009. This latest data accounts for 19,500 unemployed workers across Berks County, an increase of 500 people since August.

The City of Reading's September unemployment rate of 13.1% went up from 13% in August. The city's unemployment rate still ranks the third highest among Pennsylvania's 80 largest municipalities.



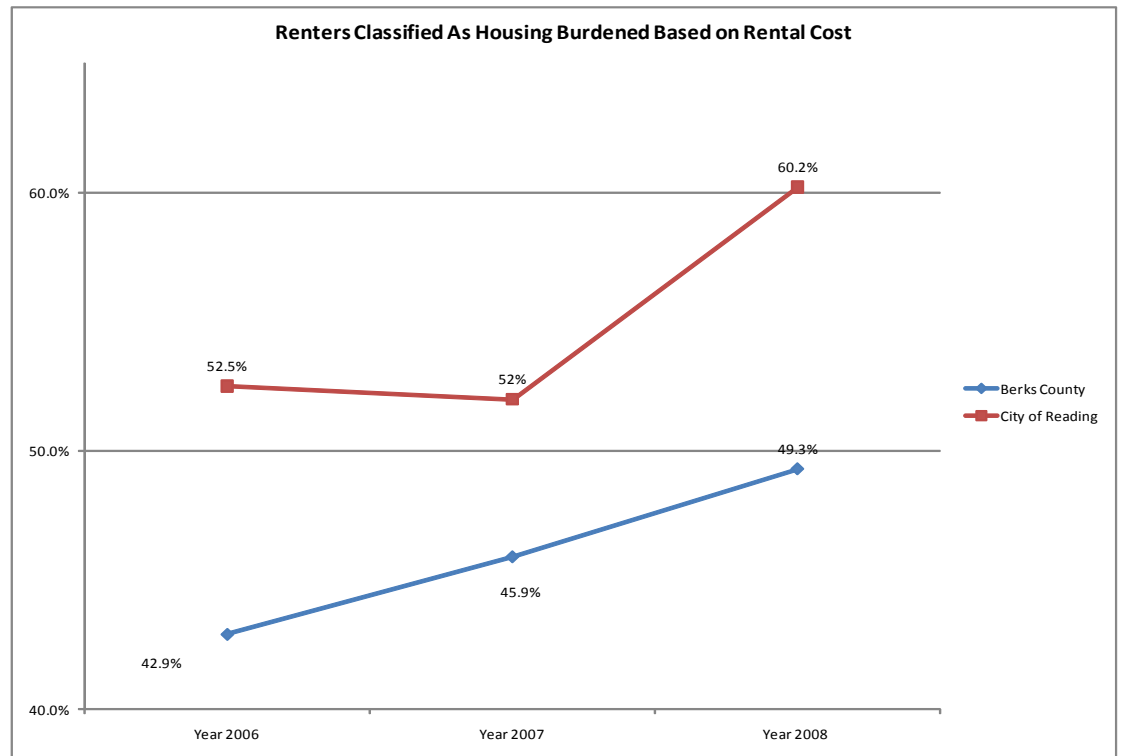
Source: Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information and Analysis

Requests for Rent Assistance on The Rise

Recently released 2008 United States Census data shows that increasing numbers of Berks County renters are spending more than 30% of their household income on rental costs, classifying them as “housing burdened” according to the federal government. In 2008, almost 50% of Berks County’s renters and over 60% of City of Reading renters were spending over one-third of their total income on rental costs. With the current economic conditions, it is estimated that these percentages will be even higher for 2009.

Renting is the most affordable option for many across the county; however, rising rental costs, loss of jobs and reduction in incomes due to the economic crisis have caused many renters to seek help with their housing costs so they can meet their bills and other basic needs.

Difficulty in paying rental costs is currently documented through the nearly 25% increase in calls to local agencies over the past three months from renters requesting assistance with their payments.



Some assistance is available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to help those who are homeless or facing eviction.

The Berks Coalition to End Homelessness has received stimulus funding for the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program, or HPRP. To be eligible for this funding, clients must meet the following criteria:

- Must be a U.S. citizen
- Must be homeless or facing eviction within two weeks (written notice) OR living in a home that is condemned
- Must demonstrate they can meet the rent through current or potential income after the funding assistance stops (18 month maximum)

In addition, the Coalition is administering a Community Emergency Fund for the Berks County Community Foundation which provides one-time cash assistance for food, utilities, heat, or rental/mortgage payment. The maximum request is \$500. To be eligible for these funds, the client must:

- Be facing hardship for the first time
- Not be receiving food stamps or welfare assistance

If someone meets the above criteria and wants to apply for assistance through either one of these programs, call the Coalition office at Opportunity House at (610) 374-4696 X 292.

Local Poverty Levels Climb

Berks County residents living at or below the poverty level has increased over the past few years, with latest 2008 Census statistics placing 11.5% of residents in poverty, up from 10.5% in 2006 and 11.3% in 2007. When considering current economic conditions, and increasing numbers of people without employment, it is expected that the number of people in poverty will grow steadily.

To meet their basic needs with less financial resources, more Berks County residents are turning to public assistance programs. Since the end of 2008 (see chart), several enrollments in these programs have grown by 10% or more, demonstrating how the economy has taken its toll here in our local area.

Since the release of the last edition of the Berks County

Berks County Recipients: Public Assistance Programs

	SNAP Program (Food Stamp) Recipients	Medical Assistance Recipients	CHIP Enrollment	Cash Assistance Recipients	
				General Assistance Recipients	TANF Recipients
Dec 08	44,412	64,043	6,017	7,424	6,021
Jun 09	48,030	67,006	6,487	7,658	6,375
Jul 09	48,623	67,039	6,605	7,670	5,879
Aug 09	49,837	68,302	6,589	7,821	6,029
Sep 09	50,375	68,671	6,662	7,867	6,599
% change Dec 08- Sep 09	13.4% increase	7.2% increase	10.7% increase	6% increase	9.6% increase

Community Snapshot, the SNAP (Food Stamp) Program experienced the largest increases in enrollments. Growth experienced this past quarter was higher than that of any other quarter of 2009. Between June and September, 2009, an additional 2,345 people enrolled in this program, a 4.8% increase in just three months. As of the end of September, 2009, 50,375 people, or 12.5% of the county population were receiving food stamps. Medical Assistance enrollments experienced a 2.4% enrollment increase in the past three months, with 68,671 Berks Countians currently on Medical Assistance, representing 17% of the whole County population.

Similar to previous quarters, growth of cash assistance (welfare) recipients has not increased at the same rates as other public assistance programs. Less than 2% of the Berks County population receives some type of cash assistance.

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Cathleen Palm "The Advocates Agenda" September, 2009

The HelpLink Network - Help for Hard Times

Current economic conditions have caused many people across Berks County to face the loss of a job or experience other financial troubles. A large majority of these people now find themselves in need for the first time in their lives and not knowing where to turn to get help.

To address this issue, **United Way of Berks County has established the HelpLink Network**, a group of agencies with trained staff and volunteers who can help people find and apply for benefits and other supportive programs they may be eligible for. Benefits people may be eligible to apply for include:

- Food Stamps
- Medical Assistance
- CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program)
- TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families)
- Child Care Subsidies
- LIHEAP (Low Income Heating Emergency Assistance Program)

HelpLink sites are located around Berks County and operate at varying times. Call a site to make an appointment with a HelpLink counselor. HelpLink sites and contact information follow:

Berks Community Action Program Phone: 610.376.657
 Berks Encore Phone: 610.374.3195
 Boyertown Area Multi-Service Phone: 610.367.6957
 Catholic Charities Phone: 610.376.7144
 Friend, Inc. Phone: 610.683.7790
 The Salvation Army: Reading Corps Phone: 610.373.5208
 United Community Services Phone: 610.374.3319

For more information on the HelpLink Network, visit United Way's website at www.uwberks.org and click on the **Help for Hard Times Guide** under the "Our Work" section located on the bottom, right-hand side of the home page.