

# 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.

Spring 2009

## Unemployment

*County Currently  
Matches National Rate*

In the past year, Berks County's unemployment rate has steadily been on the rise, with more and more businesses downsizing, conducting layoffs and even closing their doors, often leaving workers with limited options for new employment. **In just a one year period from March 2008 to March 2009, the county's unemployment rate rose from 4.7% to 8.5%.** This latest unemployment rate for the county is the highest since August 1983 when it was at 8.7%.

For the first time in several years, Berks County's unemployment rate surpassed those of both the state and nation, at 7.5% and 8.1% respectively in February 2009. In March, the county rate matched the national rate at 8.5%. In more recent years, Berks County has rarely had unemployment rates at or above the national rate, though its percentage of unemployed workers tends to rise above statewide rates.

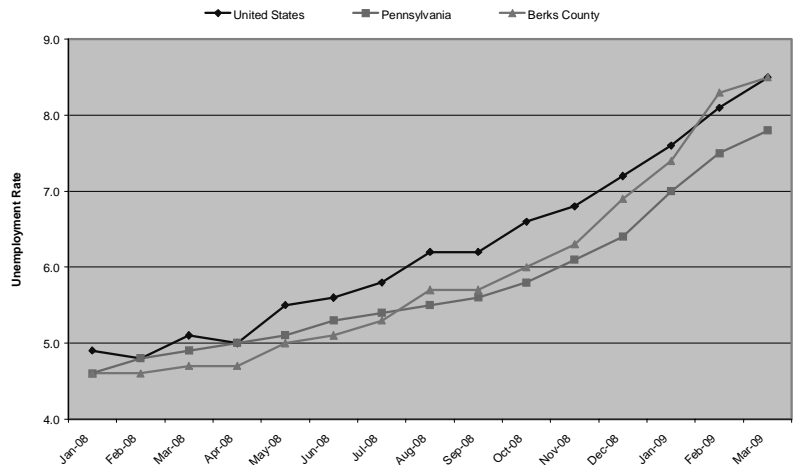
In March 2009, 17,400 people across Berks County were unemployed, a rise of 1,700 people since the beginning of 2009. Between March 2008 and March 2009, there was an increase of 7,800 who were unemployed, an 81% increase in one year.

Source: Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information and Analysis

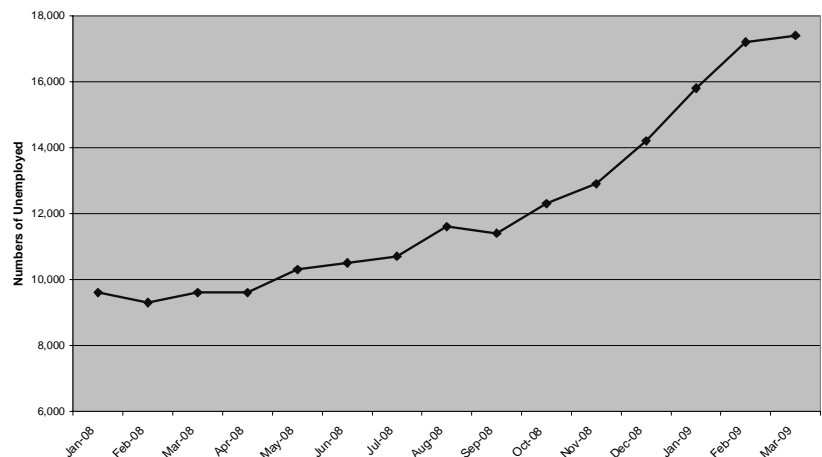
\*Seasonally adjusted numbers refer to unemployment numbers that account for seasonal changes (holiday employment, school year schedules, seasonal employment, etc) that make data easier to compare from month to month.

## Monthly Unemployment Rate

(Seasonally Adjusted)



## Number of Unemployed in Berks County



## Requests for Assistance With Basic Needs

Across the county, agencies that provide basic safety net services are witnessing increased calls from residents requiring assistance with meeting basic needs. Agencies who are currently tracking data to contribute to this report include the Salvation Army, the Greater Berks Food Bank, Friend, Inc. Community Services, the American Red Cross, Jewish Family Services, Catholic Charities, Berks Community Action Program, Berks TALKLINE and United Community Services.

Food insecurity needs account for the highest numbers of callers at most agencies, with numbers steadily increasing each month. From February to March alone, the Salvation Army's requests for food assistance increased by 13%. The Helping Hands Food Pantry at United Community Services

served an additional 26 families between January and March, 2009 alone, a 10% increase in just three months.

The two other areas with the most requests for assistance are rent assistance and assistance in paying heating bills and other utilities. The Salvation Army witnessed over a 100% increase in requests for this type of assistance between February and March 2009. Health concerns (lack of insurance or prescription coverage) are also being cited as a problem by many callers seeking help. Friend, Inc. experienced over a 100% increase in requests for health care assistance in a one month period.

This type of data will continue to be tracked on a quarterly basis. Aside from the above mentioned concerns, other areas being tracked include need for emergency shelter, mortgage assistance, disaster assistance, employment issues, and furniture and clothing needs.

## Enrollments in Public Assistance Programs

Recipients of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits have increased by 16% since March 2008, with a 5% increase between January and March of 2009. SNAP was formerly known as the Food Stamp Program.

Health insurance continues to be a concern for many Berks County residents, especially those who have fallen victim to downsizing and company layoffs and suddenly lose their benefits. In just a one year period, an additional 5,000 Berks Countians received medical assistance, a 22% increase.

CHIP (Childrens Health Insurance Program) has also witnessed higher enrollments. However, with recent changes in guidelines to the program, all children can receive CHIP regardless of family income, and families pay for CHIP according to their income.

TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) provides cash assistance to low-income families with children to help with rent, food and medical care. To receive funds, parents must participate in a work program or be enrolled in an education program that will help them gain self-sustaining employment. Recipients of TANF assistance increased by 3% since March, 2008.

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and Advocate's Agenda (Cathleen Palm, Publisher)

### Berks County Enrollments

	SNAP Program Recipients	Medicaid Enrollment	CHIP Enrollment	TANF Recipients
Mar 08	40,439	62,064	5,201	5,787
Dec 08	44,412	64,043	6,017	6,021
Jan 09	45,319	64,669	6,106	5,984
Feb 09	45,952	65,320	6,205	5,954
Mar 09	46,733	66,358	6,321	5,940
% change Mar 08-09	+ 16%	+ 7%	+ 22%	+ 3%

## Prescription Coverage

With more people losing health insurance, or having benefits reduced, many are seeking programs that can help them get their needed prescriptions at the lowest cost.

The FamilyWise Program, administered by the United Way, is a national program where up to a 35% discount can be received on any prescription not covered by an insurance plan. There are no age or income limits and no personal information is collected. A card is simply presented at a participating pharmacy and the discount can be received.

Since April, 2008, when the program began in Berks County, over \$72, 000 has been saved across Berks County through use of this program, an average of \$14.91 per prescription. Numbers of claims and the amount of money saved across the county has experienced a large increase during the last six month period.

As awareness of the program grows, it is expected that these numbers will continue to increase. For more information, contact the United Way of Berks County at (610) 685-4586 or at [jennifero@uwberks.org](mailto:jennifero@uwberks.org).

### FamilyWise Savings for Berks County

Month	Number of Claims	Amount Saved
Oct 08	404	\$4,844.71
Nov 08	444	\$6,697.38
Dec 08	563	\$8,730.69
Jan 09	592	\$10,379.37
Feb 09	693	\$12,018.10
Mar 09	756	\$15,376.64
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,452</b>	<b>\$58,046.89</b>