

# Berks County Community Snapshot



United Way of Berks County

Spring 2010

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.

## Berks County Unemployment Rate Decreases for First Time in Months

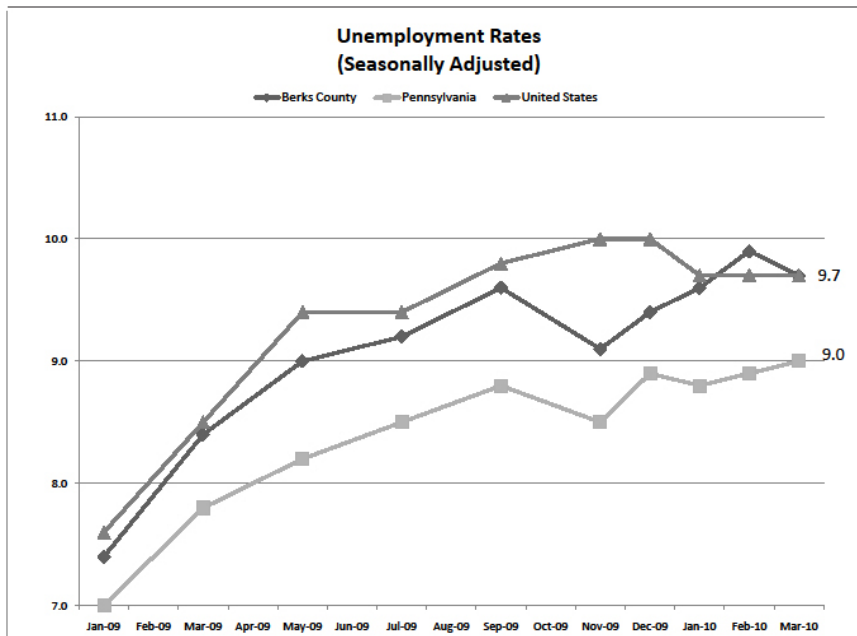
For the first time in three months, the Berks County and City of Reading unemployment rates declined. The Berks County rate fell from 9.9% in February to 9.7% in March, and the City of Reading's unemployment rate declined from 14.3% to 13.9% in the same time period. February's rates were the highest for the County and City in over twenty years, so this slight decline is encouraging for the present time. However, the most current rates still are over 1% higher than they were one year ago in March, 2009.

Berks County now ranks fifth highest (down from third) in unemployment among the state's fourteen major labor-market areas. March's unemployment rate accounts for 20,000 unemployed workers across our local area, down by 200 from the previous month.

The latest unemployment rate of 13.9% keeps Reading third (behind Hazleton and York) among Pennsylvania's 80 largest municipalities.

The State of Pennsylvania's March unemployment rate was 9 percent, and the United States rate was 9.7%. Unfortunately, the Congressional Budget Office projects that the national unemployment rate will remain greater than 9% through 2011. This is of notable concern as over 44% of unemployed Americans have been out of work for over six months, with half of them unemployed for more than a year. These statistics cut across nearly every industry and occupation and represent people of all ages and education levels.

Source: PA Center for Workforce Information and Analysis, Cathleen Palm "The Advocates Agenda" April 2010



## Requests for Basic Needs Continue

### *Highest Needs Center on Heating*

Unemployment, rising costs and other effects of the recession, have deeply impacted the demand on safety net services here in Berks and across the country. Increasing numbers of people are calling agencies for help for the first time in their lives, as families continue to struggle amidst current economic conditions.

Assistance with utility bills has been the highest request over the past three month period for several local agencies. In March alone, Salvation Army took 624 calls requesting help with heating and utilities, up from 400 earlier in the winter months. One way that some clients were able to receive help was through a two week extension of time given to apply for LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) benefits. LIHEAP provides cash grants to provide for home heating fuel and crisis grants for heating emergencies. While this extension was of assistance to many, especially with the harsh weather of the past season, hundreds of others were not eligible for the program due to

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## Requests for Basic Needs Continue

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income limits, and had limited options on where to turn. This program will not be available again until Fall, 2010.

While the last Community Snapshot featured record breaking numbers of people asking for assistance with food needs, these numbers have leveled off to some degree in the past three months. Requests for food at Jewish Family Service have remained about 60. The Greater Berks Food Bank noted that requests for food in the first quarter of this year (309 calls) were not as high as the first quarter of 2009 (522). However, the increasing number of people enrolling in the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or Food Stamp) Program still documents the fact that the need for food remains high in our local area.

### Did you know?

Archived issues of Community Snapshot publications are available on United Way of Berks County's website at [www.uwberks.org](http://www.uwberks.org). From the home page, click on "Our Work", and then click on the Community Snapshots link on the left-hand side of the page.

## Local Programs Helping People During Difficult Times

Two local programs have experienced great success in helping local residents save money and receive help during these difficult economic times.

As mentioned in the previous Community Snapshot, the **Berks \$ In Your Pocket Coalition** once again offered free tax preparation to local residents with a yearly household income of about \$50,000 or less. This year, over 3000 Berks Countians utilized this service, a 20% increase from last year. These returns brought over \$2.1 million in refunds back to Berks County, helping people purchase needed items here in our local area, pay down debt, and increase their savings. This program will be in operation again beginning in February, 2011.

United Way's **HelpLink Network** of 12 agencies is working to help those in need, many of whom are in this position for the first time, gain access to benefits and other services for which they may be eligible. Since beginning operations toward the end of 2009, the Network has served a total of 54 households, with the following results:

- 31 households were found eligible for Food Stamps, at an average of \$2,296 per household per year
- 52 children or adults were connected to some kind of medical coverage
- All households were referred to local services as appropriate

Agencies serving as HelpLink sites include Berks Community Action Program, Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, Berks Connections/Pretrial Services, Berks Encore, Boyertown Area Multi-Service, Catholic Charities, Centro Hispano, Daniel Torres, Inc., Friend, Inc. Community Services, Opportunity House, Salvation Army: Reading Corps, United Community Services and the Reading Public Library Branches.

Those interested in visiting a HelpLink site to apply for services and benefits can call one of the above agencies. More information is available on the United Way of Berks County website at [www.uwberks.org](http://www.uwberks.org) in the Here to Help section located at the bottom right hand corner of the home page.

## Enrollments in Public Assistance Programs

As more Berks County residents find themselves in need due to economic conditions, enrollment in public benefit programs continues to rise, and is not expected to slow down in the near future.

Of most concern is the continued increase in Food Stamp enrollment, as over 500 additional people per month became eligible for this program since the beginning of this year. As of March 2010, 13.5% of the Berks County population was receiving Food Stamps. Over half (52%) of the recipients were age 20 and under, ranking the county worst in the state (tied with Lehigh and Dauphin Counties) for the percentage of children and youth receiving this benefit.

Between February and March, 2010, recipients of Medical Assistance benefits increased by over 1,400 people, the largest one month increase since 2008. 17.7% of County population was eligible for Medical Assistance at the end of March. As there are no income limitations for a child to apply for CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program), more families are enrolling their children in this program. Over 6,800 children in the county have this insurance to meet their medical needs.

Consistent with data presented previously, Cash Assistance enrollments are not increasing to the degree of other public benefit program enrollments. Those receiving funds through TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) represent the largest proportion of residents receiving cash assistance. The maximum TANF cash grant for a family of three is \$421 per month. To qualify for TANF, parents must be enrolled in a work or education program that will help them acquire gainful employment. A high percentage (82%) of TANF recipients in Berks County are age 20 and under. The county ranks 5th highest in the state for numbers of TANF recipients.

*Source: Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare*

<b>Berks County Recipients: Public Assistance Programs</b>				
	SNAP Program (Food Stamp) Recipients	Medical Assistance Recipients	<u>Cash Assistance Recipients</u>	
			General Assistance Recipients	TANF Recipients
Mar 09	46,733	66,358	7,326	5,940
Dec 09	53,292	69,697	7,830	6,628
Jan 10	54,062	70,175	7,857	6,619
Feb 10	54,607	70,729	7,796	6,536
Mar 10	55,162	72,135	7,782	6,518
% change Mar 09- Mar 10	18% increase	9% increase	6.2% increase	9.7% increase