

Berks County Community Snapshot



United Way of Berks County

Winter 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.

Hunger in America Study Results Released

In 2009, United Way of Berks County partnered with the Greater Berks Food Bank to conduct the Hunger in America Research Project in our local area. This study is conducted every four years through Feeding America, the nationwide network of over 200 food banks. This is the first time that our local food bank participated in the study. Results from the study were recently released at the beginning of February.

The study's objectives were to provide more detailed demographic information on who the hungry are here in the greater Berks County area, and the economic circumstances that cause them to visit food pantries, soup kitchens and other food distribution sites in order to meet their food needs.

Both food distribution agencies and recipients of food participated in the study. 109 agencies completed surveys describing their food distribution sites, their operations and the numbers of clients they serve. Over 70 volunteers were responsible for interviewing the 255 food recipients who participated in the study. The study showed that the Greater Berks Food Bank serves an estimated 60,800 different people annually, with about 10,600 people receiving food assistance in any given week. Demographic information for clients served by the Greater Berks Food Bank include:

- 56% non-Hispanic white
- 12% non Hispanic African-American
- 30% Hispanic

Other information revealed by the report included the high numbers of local children receiving food assistance. Of all household members served by the Greater Berks Food Bank, an estimated 36% are under 18 years of age, and 10% are children ages 0-5. When considering the fact that 50% of Food Stamp recipients in Berks County are below the age of 18, the study's findings further document that many youth in our local area are suffering from food hardship.

Hunger in America 2010 also discusses how food assistance recipients are forced to choose between paying for food and other basic necessities in order to get by. Findings include:

- 43% of clients report having to choose between paying for food and paying for utilities or heat
- 33% need to choose between paying for food and paying for medicine or medical care.
- 30% need to choose between paying for food and paying their rent or mortgage

These findings and others included in the report help us to validate information that we have only been able to assume in the past and gives us valuable information that will help in future planning efforts to address the needs of the hungry. For more detailed information on the findings from the Hunger in America 2010 study, visit the Greater Berks Food Bank website at www.berksfoodbank.org.

Help with Food Assistance a Key Need

As the state of the national and local economy remains uncertain, residents in the Berks County area continue to seek help in meeting their basic needs. Many of these residents are seeking assistance for the first time.

While requests for food assistance have been on an upward trend in the past year, these requests greatly increased during the past holiday season, as witnessed by several local agencies. Friend, Inc. Community Services served 553 individuals at its food pantry in November, a 12% increase from November the previous year. Jewish Family Service took 61 calls for food assistance in just one month at the end of 2009, a 35% increase from earlier months in the year. In addition, United Community Services served over 1,100 clients at its food pantry in December, with 37 clients being first time recipients.

While the federal and state Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) has provided monetary relief for many residents trying to pay their heating bills, calls requesting help in this area still remain very high. In just a one month period, Salvation Army received almost 400 calls from residents needing assistance with paying heating and utility bills, many of whom were not eligible for LIHEAP and were not sure of other options.

One area of need that has experienced more significant growth in recent months is help with paying medical bills and prescription needs. As many people have lost health insurance and have reduced incomes, this has become a much larger need in our local area. Increased use of United Way's FamilyWise Discount Prescription Card Program demonstrates how more people are requiring assistance with prescription needs.

In December alone, over 1,500 claims were made through the use of this card, a total of over \$27,000 in savings for those using the program. This card is available through United Way of Berks County's website at www.uwberks.org under the Here to Help section at the bottom right hand corner of the home page.

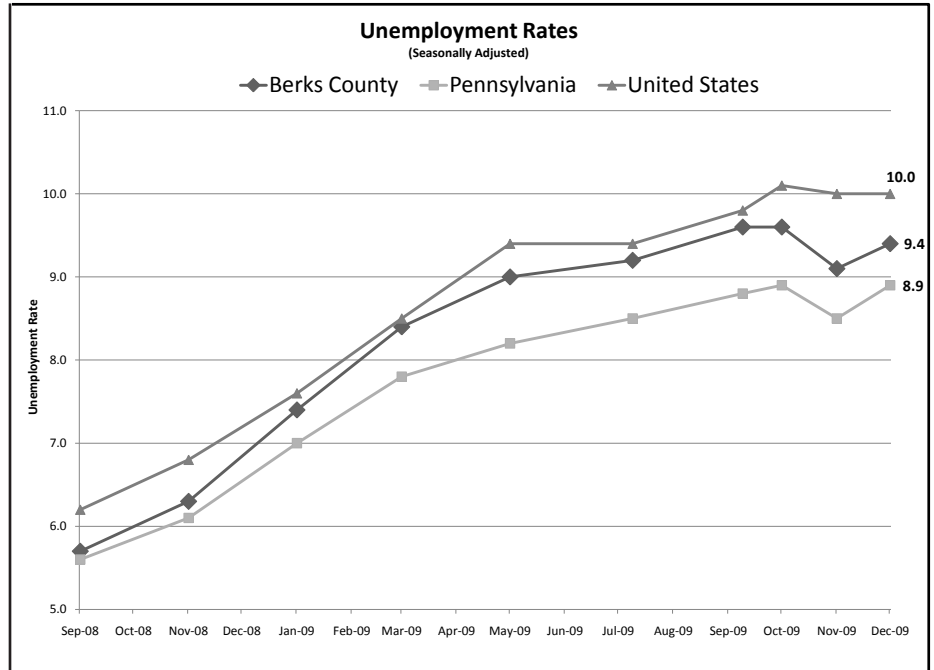
Unemployment Rate for Berks County On the Rise Again

Berks County's unemployment rate resumed an upward swing between November and December, 2009, rising from 9.1 to 9.4%. December's unemployment rate was the second highest in 2009, behind the rate of 9.6% reported for the months of September and October.

This places Berks County fourth highest (tied with Johnstown) in unemployment rates among the state's fourteen major labor market areas. This most current rate accounts for 18,800 unemployed workers across the county, and is an increase of 500 people since November.

The County's unemployment rate remains below the national rate of 10%, but above the state rate of 8.9%. The City of Reading's December unemployment rate of 12.8% was three-tenths of a percentage point higher than in November, but lower than the rate of 13.4% reported in October, 2009. Reading's unemployment rate continues to rank third among Pennsylvania's 80 largest municipalities, behind Hazelton at 14.8% and York at 14.6%.

Source: *Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information and Analysis*



Free Tax Preparation Services

During these difficult economic times, people are seeking ways to save costs in any way possible. One way is through taking advantage of free tax preparation services.

The Berks \$ in Your Pocket Coalition was formed back in 2008 to provide free tax preparation services to eligible clients, and to help them claim tax credits they may not have claimed in the past. Coalition members include Berks Community Action Program, Berks Encore, Boyertown Area Multi-Service, Catholic Charities, Centro Hispano, Friend, Inc. Community Services, and United Way of Berks County.

Last year, the coalition helped over 2,500 Berks County residents to file their taxes for free, generating over \$1.6 million in refunds, including over \$430,000 in EITC (Earned Income Tax Credit) refunds. The EITC is a tax credit for low-income working individuals and families to supplement their earned wages.

Eligibility requirements for free tax preparation include a household income of approximately \$50,000 or less. More information is available on the United Way of Berks County website at www.uwberks.org. Click on Free Tax Prep on the home page.

This year, an expanded list of sites have been established around Berks County to offer free tax preparation services. Trained volunteers are available at all sites to help complete tax returns. All sites operate at different days and times and are run by appointment only. For a listing of sites and their contact information, visit United Way of Berks County's website at the address listed above.

Enrollments in Public Assistance Programs

Berks County residents continue to apply for and utilize public assistance programs to meet their basic needs as economic conditions remain a major concern here. Increases are especially notable when comparing enrollment numbers at the end of 2008 to those at the end of 2009.

The SNAP (Food Stamp) Program experienced the largest increase in enrollments, with a 20% increase in recipients since the end of 2008, numbering almost 9,000 people. Between September and the end of 2009, the number of recipients grew by over 3,000, a 5.8% increase in just one quarter. At the end of 2009, 13.2% of the Berks County population was receiving food stamps, exceeding the state percentage of 12.3%.

While Medical Assistance enrollments did not experience significant growth in the last quarter of 2009, enrollments grew by 8.9%, or over 5,000 people, since the end of 2008. Latest figures show that 17.3% of the Berks County population is receiving Medical Assistance, slightly up from 17% at the end of September.

The overall number of cash assistance recipients actually decreased slightly from September to the end of 2009; however, recipient numbers are still 400 people higher than they were at the end of 2008. TANF recipients grew by 10% in a one year period, an increase of over 600 people, but growth in the last quarter of the year was very small. Similar to the rest of 2009, less than 2% of the Berks County population is receiving some form of cash assistance.

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare

Berks County Recipients: Public Assistance Programs				
	SNAP Program (Food Stamp) Recipients	Medical Assistance Recipients	<u>Cash Assistance Recipients</u>	
			General Assistance Recipients	TANF Recipients
Dec 08	44,412	64,043	7,424	6,021
Sep 09	50,375	68,671	7,867	6,599
Oct 09	51,687	69,539	7,865	6,626
Nov 09	52,336	69,118	7,751	6,549
Dec 09	53,292	69,697	7,830	6,628
% change Dec 08- Dec 09	20% increase	8.9% increase	5.5% increase	10% increase