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BACK TO WORK

State, regional, unemployment rate continues to drop

By Christian M. Wade Statehouse Reporter Jun 5, 2015



Capstone Logistics site manager Roger Dube talks with a group of job applicants at a recent job recruitment fair at the Valley Works Career Center in Lawrence.

PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo



LAWRENCE — Dozens of job seekers showed up at the ValleyWorks Career Center Thursday afternoon where representatives of Capstone Logistics of Methuen were seeking workers for "immediate openings" in its warehouse operation.

The company was offering permanent full-time jobs with benefits.

And, Arthur Chilingirian, executive director of the ValleyWorks Career Center in Lawrence and Haverhill, says this is a good time to be looking for jobs in Massachusetts.

The state's economy is humming along, despite the brutal winter, and a recent state report on jobs suggests that regional unemployment is down to levels not seen since before the recession.

Statewide unemployment decreased from 5 percent to 4.1 percent from April 2014 to April 2015, below the national rate of 5.4 percent, according to the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Of nearly 3.6 million people in the state's labor force, 3.45 million are employed while 148,600 remain unemployed.

Overall, the state's labor participation rate — residents 16 or older who were working or seeking employment — climbed to a nearly five-year high of 66.3 percent in April, according to state officials.

It seems to be the same situation across the border in New Hampshire where the unemployment rate is also at its lowest since before the recession, which began in 2009.

Across the Granite State, the non-season adjusted unemployment rate in April was at 3.8 percent, down from 4 percent at the beginning of the year.

At the peak of the recession, rates neared 6.6 percent, said Annette Nielsen, an economist for the Economic and Labor Market Information Bureau.

"If we stay below 4 percent here in New Hampshire, that's what we consider the norm" Nielsen said. "This year, we've been getting back to that."

The state has the seventh lowest unemployment rate, and sits below the national rate of 5.4 percent.

"Normally, the state's rate is below the national average, but they fall at a parallel rate," Nielsen said.

Education, training, health care, legal occupations and community and social services all have unemployment rates below the New Hampshire state average.

For many parts of the Merrimack Valley, the outlook is better than the state average.

Even Lawrence, where the rate was 10.9 percent in April 2014, has dropped to 8.1 percent in the past year.

"People are starting to reinvest in their businesses and hire more workers, which is critically important to the region's recovery as a whole," said Joe Bevilacqua, president & CEO of the Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce. "Overall, people are feeling better about the economy, and I think the unemployment numbers are starting to reflect that."

Bevilacqua said there's been an uptick in construction jobs, residential and commercial, and in health care and higher education. There also has been growth in exports, as companies seek international markets.

"We're not out of the woods yet, but the outlook has improved greatly," he said.

Companies are on the hunt for new employees at career centers across the state, representatives say.

Chilingirian, of the ValleyWorks Career Center, said the economic recovery has been good for college graduates, as well, many of whom are landing jobs shortly after graduating.

"They're not just getting part-time jobs, but good paying jobs coming out of college," he said. "That hasn't happened in a long time."

Retail is another source of growth, Chilingirian said, as are high-tech, health services and education jobs.

But there is a skills gap for light manufacturing jobs that career centers are retraining workers to fill.

"I'm talking to manufacturing companies that are giving work away because they can't find workers," Chilingirian said.

The regional unemployment numbers, based on household surveys, are not adjusted for seasonal changes in the economy.

The adjusted jobless rate is slightly higher – 4.7 percent statewide – counting those who have stopped looking for work or who are working part-time but are seeking full time employment.

Gov. Charlie Baker has formed a special commission to tackle the problem of the chronically unemployed. The panel will focus on "target populations" such as minorities, veterans and persons with disabilities who continue to see higher-than-average unemployment rates between 7 and 12 percent.

"Too many Massachusetts workers have become discouraged as a growing economy unfortunately leaves them behind," Baker said recently.

But those who work with the unemployed say there is growing optimism in the state's job market.

"One can always question the unemployment rate and whether it's accurate or not, but it's just one metric," said Mary Sarris, executive director of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board. "But the reality is we're seeing a lot of companies hiring in healthcare, manufacturing and construction. There's a lot of activity in these sectors."

Staff reporter Breanna Edelstein contributed to this report.

Unemployment by city/towns

Massachusetts: 4.1 percent

Andover 3.1

Haverhill 4.5

Lawrence 8.1

Methuen 4.6

Newburyport 3.5

Source: Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

Statewide unemployment rate down in N.H.

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