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Skilled laborers are in demand

BY ETHAN FORMAN STAFF WRITER Dec 26, 2016



SALEM — Employers are scrambling to find enough skilled workers to fill positions amid low unemployment numbers released last week for the region.

“The opportunities abound for people,” said Mary Sarris, the executive director of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board.

The unemployment rate in the Peabody, Beverly and Salem area plunged to 2.3 percent in November, down from 2.6 percent in October, according to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

The unemployment rate for a much broader region of the North Shore, from Cape Ann to Saugus, stands at 2.5 percent in the 19 communities of the North Shore Workforce Development Area. That’s down 1.9 percent from November 2015.

While this may seem like great news, it’s not so if you are an employer whose products require skilled labor, or who build buildings.

“It’s good news,” said Sarris. “I will tell you it’s a challenge for companies right now to hire people.”

The state reported Dec. 20 on seasonally unadjusted unemployment and job estimates for local labor markets using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The 2.3 percent rate for the Peabody, Beverly and Salem area is down from 4.2 percent in November 2015, a drop of nearly two points.

Year over year, there were nearly 1,700 fewer unemployed people in this region, according to the data, which is not seasonally adjusted. Unemployment rates in all areas of the state were down when compared with November 2015.

Sarris said part of the reason the North Shore has a low unemployment rate is because many of the region’s companies are doing well. General Electric in Lynn is hiring, she said, due to a round of early retirements.

“You have to be very skilled to work at GE,” Sarris said. Companies like Analogic in Peabody, Applied Materials in Gloucester and Microline Surgical in Beverly also require skilled workers.

To that end, the North Shore Workforce Investment Board is part of the Northeast Advanced Manufacturing Consortium designed to train people in advanced manufacturing. Four workforce investment boards are managing the consortium, including the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board, the Metro North Regional Employment Board and the Greater Lowell Workforce Development Board.

Middlesex Community College, North Shore Community College, Northern Essex Community College and now Bunker Hill Community College are part of the consortium, Sarris said, which also works with vocational technical schools to provide hands-on training for workers. The goal is to train new workers for entry level jobs at advanced manufacturers in the region.

Construction trades and the restaurant industry are also having trouble finding enough people, Sarris said.

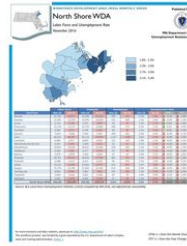
The health care industry, the largest employer in the region, continues to hire. Sarris said the North Shore and the state has an older population and a lower birth rate than other parts of the country, “so we don’t have the same number of people coming up.”

Communities like Lynn and Salem, which have a significant immigrant population, are the exception to this trend.

“We need to be thankful for our immigrants,” Sarris said. “They are going to be building our labor force.”

Robert Bradford, the president of the North Shore Chamber of Commerce, said at the chamber's board meeting last week that the No. 1 issue that came up was finding skilled workers, with businesses saying things are better than they were a few years ago. Dovetailing with that was the lack of affordable housing, which prevents the area from retaining college graduates in the region.

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November 2016 North Shore WDA rates
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