

# With many Berkshires arts organizations closed for the season, unemployed workers facing a grim summer

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In early March, Amber MacNeil landed a sought-after job at Blantyre, a five-star resort in a Tudor-style mansion in the Berkshires. MacNeil was set to be a full-time server at the Lenox estate's elegant restaurant, earning roughly \$20 an hour, plus employer-provided health insurance and a 401(k) match — a first for the 29-year-old artist who had been working three part-time jobs.

Then the coronavirus pandemic swept through the state, closing Blantyre's doors and taking MacNeil's job with it, along with thousands of others. Now, 15 percent of residents are unemployed, one of the highest rates in Massachusetts.

The COVID-19 crisis has devastated the Berkshires, where tourists flock for theater, art, music, and dance, as well as yoga, spa treatments, and hiking and biking amid wooded hills. One after another this spring, world-renowned organizations canceled their seasons or shut their doors, some for the entire year — crippling the Berkshires' tourism industry and the more than 8,000 people working in it.

Many residents had already been struggling in recent years, as lower-wage hospitality jobs proliferated and housing prices soared.

The virus forced Blantyre resort to close. About 15 percent of Berkshire County residents are jobless.

But for people with money, the woodsy, wide-open Berkshires has become even more desirable, as the global pandemic stokes fears of crowds and opens up opportunities to work remotely. City dwellers looking for second homes, or hoping to relocate altogether, are snapping up high-end homes, some without physically visiting the property.

The pandemic is shining a glaring spotlight on economic inequality in America, and perhaps nowhere is it more evident than in tourist destinations such as the Berkshires. Low-wage workers have either lost their jobs or are compelled to put themselves at risk of infection while serving the public, while higher-income earners, safe at home on their laptops, can still afford vacation homes.

MacNeil, the server set to start at Blantyre, is forging a new path, creating a website for her art and applying for financial aid to go back to school. But the uncertainty has been daunting.

"I'm trying not to think about the fact that everything is crumbling underneath me," she said.

Hospitality workers make some of the lowest wages in Berkshire County, averaging just under \$28,000 a year in 2017, according to the most recent data from 1Berkshire, the area's economic development agency. Between 2000 and 2017, the number of Berkshire County residents paying more than a third of their income on rent rose by nearly 21 percent, according to the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation.

The pandemic will surely make that problem worse. In April alone, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts served more than 39,000 new clients — and 24 percent more overall than the previous April.

"We recognized that as COVID became more and more of a reality in the county, that the vulnerable people in our community were going to be affected disproportionately," said Candace Winkler, president of Berkshire United Way. "And often it is entry-level employees, it is low-wage earners, it is people of color that are staffing our tourism and hospitality industry."

The nine-room Chambery Inn in Lee relies on reservations from Tanglewood ticket holders, and when the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra called off its season, "it put a nail in the coffin for the summer," said owner Bob Healey. The inn recently reopened, but Healey doesn't expect many guests and anticipates only bringing back a handful of staff, at most.

"Everybody is very scared out here," said Healey, who runs the local chamber of commerce. "The demand just isn't going to be there [for businesses] to bring these employees back."

Bob and Olia Healey recently reopened their Chambery Inn in Lee but the couple do not expect many guests because nearby arts, dance, and music centers have closed.

Tourists will still come for outdoor recreation, noted Jonathan Butler, president of 1Berkshire, as well as to visit museums, which can potentially reopen in July. But half of the area's tourist spending comes from out-of-staters, many of whom may stay away as quarantine advisories linger and worries about travel remain in full effect.

"The pandemic is a type of epidemic that is particularly ill suited for the Berkshires," Butler said. "It has directly impacted people's ability to interact, to congregate, to experience things."

Workers who have been laid off will also have less money to spend at local businesses. Laci Parker, a massage therapist and single mother of three in Pittsfield who specializes in injuries and chronic conditions, is worried that if the construction workers and waitresses she serves have lost their jobs, they won't be able to afford her services.

"If the locals aren't making any money," she said, "I'm not making any money either."

"If the locals aren't making any money, I'm not making any money either," said Laci Parker, a massage therapist, with her youngest son David.

Immigrants have been particularly hard hit by tourism-related closures. About a quarter of requests for financial assistance from the Berkshire Immigrant Center in recent months have come from new clients, said executive director Michelle Lopez, the majority of them in hospitality-related occupations. Evictions and utility shutoffs have been deferred for now, but the coming months could be devastating, she said: "People are going to end up in crippling debt when things start picking back up."

One client seeking help, a 29-year-old native of Ghana who asked not to be identified because of his open immigration case, worked at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health as a dishwasher for four years, complete with health insurance and vacation time. He's picking up extra shifts at his second job assisting people with disabilities, but now that his main source of income has vanished, he may move away to be closer to family. "I don't know how people [here] are going to survive," he said.

Lopez knows first-hand that, unlike the immigrants she serves, plenty of people are doing just fine. She and her husband are house hunting and have seen new listings snatched up immediately, often with offers above asking. City dwellers from New York, Boston, and elsewhere are looking to get away from people and the virus they may carry, and they are drawn to the region's open spaces, said Eric Steuernagle, a real estate broker-owner in southern Berkshire County.

Growing opportunities to work remotely are playing into it, too.

"They want space, they want to feel comfortable, they want to feel safe," he said.

Demand is up throughout the market, but most notably in higher price ranges. In May, sales were pending on 23 houses listed above \$700,000, according to the Berkshire County Board of Realtors, more than double the number poised to sell for each of the past five Mays.

Kirk Grippo, owner of Olde Forge Restaurant in Lanesboro, has been thinking about the great disparity between his customers, many of whom are second home owners, and his employees, who often work multiple jobs to make ends meet — especially as he prepared to reopen and saw staffers' hands shaking with fear.

It's not just restaurant workers Grippo worries about. It's the people delivering packages and meals and groceries, while others work at home and order everything online.

"It's like we're creating a different class structure. It's almost a servant class," he said. "Those people are going into the stores, interacting with [other] people, working to put your stuff together. ... But that person is taking all the risk for you for a nominal amount of money."

Graham Moriarty, a part-time groundskeeper at Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, stopped working in March when the schools closed to take care of his daughters. His wife, who also works for the shuttered theater company, will be furloughed at the end of June. She can collect unemployment, but he hasn't worked enough hours to qualify.

"We were just really banking on her having a job, because there's nothing to be found out here," said Moriarty, 41. "The jobs listings have really just gone away completely."

Jacob's Pillow, the dance festival in Becket, typically employs more than 100 people in the summer to work as ushers, technicians, and box office workers. But it also contracts with The Old Inn on the Green to wine and dine guests; hires Savory Harvest Catering to feed its staff and dancers; counts on Valerie Locher Horticulturalists to maintain its gardens; and puts up dancers at the Black Swan Inn. These businesses, already reeling from the pandemic, had to scale back further when the dance festival was called off.

"There's a deep ripple effect," said Jacob's Pillow artistic director Pamela Tatge. And it goes both ways. "Our success is wrapped up in the health and well being of all who live here."

At the nearby Dream Away Lodge, a restaurant and live music venue in a 200-year-old Becket farmhouse where dance companies often throw parties, the shutdown prompted owner Daniel Osman to attempt to equalize the incomes between his kitchen workers and front-of-the-house staff. When the restaurant reopened for outdoor dining, it started charging a 20 percent service fee to be divided among all employees in lieu of tips, which previously went only to wait staff.

"If we're going to be making less money," he said, "we're going to share that differently because everyone has to live."

If anything good has come of the pandemic, it's this kind of attention being paid to the divide between the haves and have-nots, said Alisa Costa, initiative director of Berkshire Bridges Working Cities, which assists low-income residents.

"Where before we had to shine a light on cracks in the system," she said, "it's made those cracks more visible."