

# Western Massachusetts unemployment: 'People are ... hiring in very small numbers ... all we are getting is onesies and twosies'



At 10.7 percent unemployment, Springfield had the ninth-highest unemployment rate in the state and the highest in Western Massachusetts last month. Holyoke was next highest in the region at 10.2 percent, up from 10 percent the month before but better than the 10.3 percent unemployment rate recorded a year ago in December 2012. (*Associated Press [file]*)



By [Jim Kinney, The Republican](#) on January 28, 2014 at 9:03 PM

SPRINGFIELD — [Yankee Candle Co.](#) is looking for machine operators, C&S Wholesale is looking for both warehouse workers and buyers.

The Home Depot's distribution center in Westfield, water gate and bulkhead maker Rodney Hunt in Orange, Smith and Amherst colleges – they are all looking to hire people, said Patricia Crosby, executive director of the [Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board](#).

The problem is, while opportunities are out there, there are not enough new jobs to meet with demand and begin to bring down the region's persistently high unemployment rate.

"People are still being very cautious and hiring in very small numbers and apparently not feeling too optimistic," Crosby said. "All we are getting is onesies and twosies."

In Springfield, Rexene A. Picard, executive director of [FutureWorks](#) one-stop career center, said 25 employers attended a recent job fair, including several who hadn't participated in previous fairs.

Springfield's [unemployment](#) rate rose in December to 10.7 percent, up a tenth of a percentage point from the 10.6 percent recorded in November.

In Franklin County, where Crosby does much of her work, the unemployment rate was 6.6 percent in December, up from 6.4 percent in November and 6.5 percent a year ago in December 2012.

The numbers, released Tuesday by the state [Executive office of Labor and Workforce Development](#) and the federal [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), are not adjusted for seasonal changes in the economy, such as a large number of holiday employees at retailers and shipping companies.

Springfield recorded a 10.6 percent unemployment rate a year ago in December 2012.

In December 2013, the number of unemployed Springfield residents rose from 6,816 in November to 6,896. The number of those with jobs fell from 57,592 to 57,267. The city labor pool fell from 64,408 in November to 64,163 in December 2013.

The city had a labor force of 65,030 a year ago in December 2012, a sign that fewer people are looking for work.

"One clearly possible cause is that people are just discouraged," said [Robert A. Nakosteen](#), professor of economics and statistics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. "People are considered in the labor force when they look for a job recently. How many times can you go looking knocking on doors and handing out resumes?"

Crosby said she's often frustrated that companies won't hire people who have been out of work for longer than six months. It's a frustration President Obama was expected to confront in the State of the Union Address Tuesday night. In Massachusetts, Crosby said, employers can get a tax credit that can cover the cost of retraining the long-term unemployed.

"I wish companies wouldn't use that as a screen for candidates," she said.

At 10.7 percent unemployment, Springfield had the ninth-highest unemployment rate in the state and the highest in Western Massachusetts. Holyoke was next highest in the region at 10.2 percent, up from 10 percent the month before but better than the 10.3 percent unemployment rate recorded a year ago in December 2012.

As a region, Greater Springfield had an unemployment rate of 7.9 percent, up from 7.7 percent in November 2013 and 7.7 percent a year ago in December 2012.

Looking at jobs numbers, Greater Springfield lost 1,200 jobs from November to December, a 0.4 percent decline. The region is up 300 jobs on the year, however, a gain of just 0.1 percent.

Statewide, Massachusetts lost 6,900 jobs on the month, a 0.2 percent decline. On the year, the state is up 54,900 jobs or a 1.7 percent gain.

The statewide average unemployment is 6.7 percent, up from 6.6 percent in November.

Adjusted for seasonal changes in the economy, the state added 10,300 jobs in December and the total unemployment rate was 7.0 percent. Over the year, the unemployment rate was up 0.3 of a percentage point from the December 2012 rate of 6.7 percent.

However, when the [underemployed](#), those working part-time who would rather be working full-time, and those who have dropped out of the workforce are taken into account, the state's unemployment rate is 13.2 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The national average for unemployment is 6.7 percent.

Statewide, the largest job gains in December were in Peabody and in the areas of Lowell-Billerica-Chelmsford, Leominster-Fitchburg-Gardner and Framingham.

In a separate release, the Bureau of Labor Statistics said the average weekly wage in Hampden County was \$832 for the most recent quarter. That's unchanged from the quarter before lagging growth in other parts of the state.

Nakosteen said high-tech industries in Eastern Massachusetts are adding jobs.

"The western part of the state is not sharing in that," he said. "It may be that we don't have a healthy enough economy that the supporting industries are not growing. It is going to take a real robust national economy before you see pickup in these numbers. And we just are not there yet."

But Nakosteen is hopeful that hiring will pick up later this year into 2015.

"I really think the pieces are there," he said, citing strong purchases of big-ticket consumer items. "You can already see that people are buying a lot of cars. People start buying things, going to the movies, one thing leads to another."