

UNEMPLOYMENT IMPACTS AREA UNEVENLY WITH WADENA AT 7.7%



Rebecca Mitchell/Pioneer Journal

While working with businesses and job seekers during the pandemic, Penmac staffing specialist Ashley Matthes said people have been interested in temporary positions.

By Rebecca Mitchell
For People in Business

Unemployment rates across the United States and Minnesota have been part of the unprecedented impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Wadena County at 7.7% for June. From March to June, Wadena County ranged from 7.4% to 11.2%, with the highest percentage in April, according to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. For March to June 2019, the unemployment rate ranged from 4.9% to 8.9%.

"It's definitely hit the community hard," said Ashley Matthes, Penmac staffing specialist.

While Penmac Staffing's clients are predominantly in the essential business sectors with current job openings, Matthes said people have been interested in temporary positions as they wait to return fully to a previous position. One area with fewer opportunities are clerical openings, according to Matthes. She said temporary positions might not be within people's original fields.

"It's kind of a neat opportunity, I think, for people right now, if they look at it that way — just to try something new, add some different types of skill sets to their resumes," Matthes said.

At Wadena County Human Services, income maintenance supervisor Deb Nelson said they had expected more changes in people applying for programs, such as health care, food and cash programs. At the beginning of people receiving unemployment, "some" food stamp and cash cases closed, according to Nelson. SNAP cases were at 683 in March, 706 in April, 689 in May and 693 in June, according to a Human Services statistical report on July 21. Nelson also said there was a "slight increase" in medical assistance programs. The medical assis-

tance cases were at 950 in March, 957 in April and May and 952 in June, according to the report.

"With people being scared with the \$600 unemployment going off, we've been seeing ... more applications in the last couple of weeks now, and I think that's due to them realizing that some of this income is going to stop, and just looking forward," Nelson said.

Looking at unemployment insurance applications since March 16, DEED Northwest Minnesota Regional Labor Market Analyst Erik White said there have been 1,494 such applications in Wadena County, or approximately 25% of the labor force. The insurance applications are counted cumulatively, so if a person has received eight weeks of unemployment insurance they are included eight times, according to White.

Within these applications, people between the ages of 25 and 34 have a cumulative count of 342, 35- to 44-year-olds are at 310, and 45- to 54-year-olds are at 270 in Wadena County, according to DEED. Younger workers are "facing the brunt" due to jobs in the food service and accommodation sectors, as White said. This has also meant higher unemployment rates in regions with these types of sectors, such as 14% for Crow Wing County in May, according to White.

In Wadena County, the top five occupations applying for unemployment insurance are production occupations, food and beverage serving workers, construction trades workers and cooks, and food preparation workers, according to DEED.

In June, there were 161 initial unemployment claims and 447 regular

continuing applications in Wadena County, according to White. The initial unemployment claims tripled from 56 in June 2019, as White said.

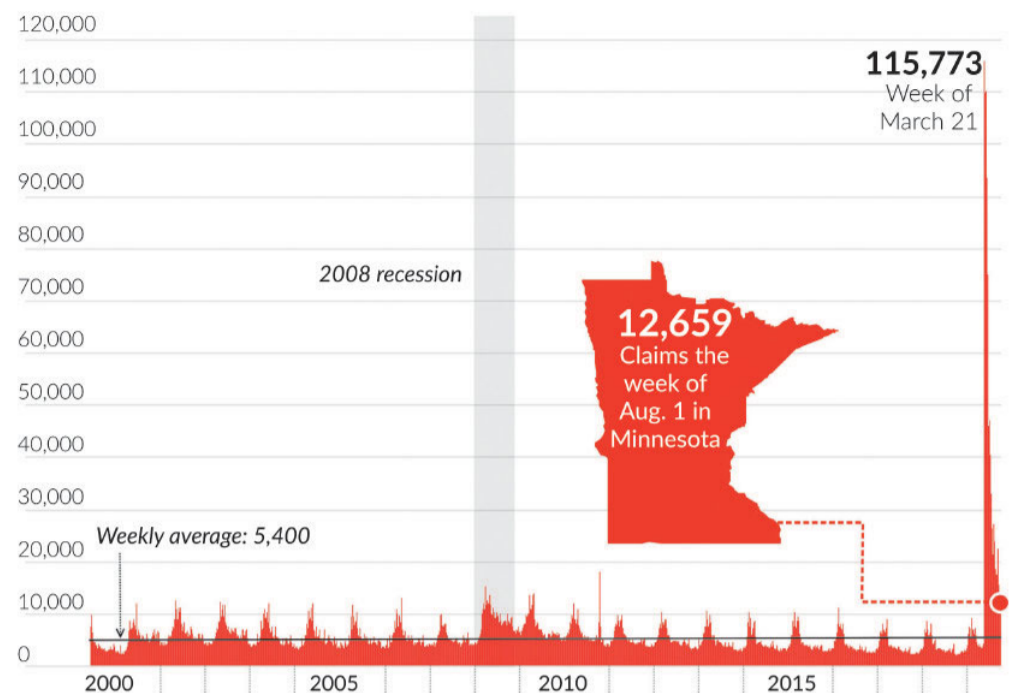
"The question is what are those businesses that might not be able to survive or are some of these new unemployment insurance applicants happening, say, this month and they were working in March and April and May but things aren't working out now and so they're having to file in June," White said.

The numbers released through June have shown a slight decrease in unemployment rates after a "huge spike" in March and April throughout Minnesota, according to White.

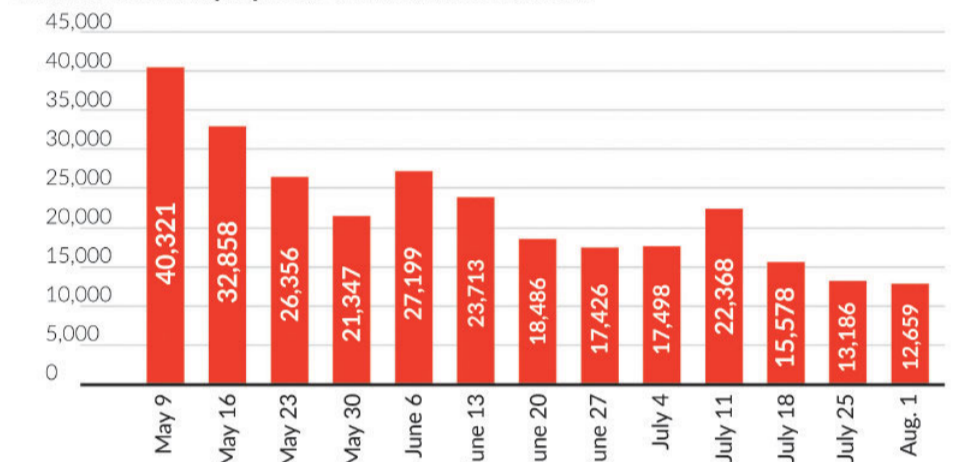
Matthes said the amount of people looking for part time positions could also increase with the ending of the weekly federal unemployment checks of \$600. The program came as part of the coronavirus relief bill and ended on

The coronavirus continues to take jobs

Weekly unemployment claims in Minnesota since 2000.



Minnesota unemployment claims in recent weeks



Source: Minnesota Employment and Economic Development

Troy Becker / Forum News Service

July 25. Federal lawmakers are considering different future benefits.

"I do think that there'll be more people looking for those opportunities short-term just because regular unemployment is not possibly going to be enough to keep their family afloat so ... job seekers will really start creeping up, I do

believe, in the next few weeks," Matthes said.

Both Matthes and White stated the concern of people not applying for positions due to the checks, though White said that fear has been "overstated" and Matthes said the checks have allowed people "to do the right thing" for their situation.

"For some people that extra benefit helped considerably, and actually the region's economy has shown that there's more spending going on in the economy because of that benefit, so once that ceases we'll get to see a different picture of what's going on with the unemployment," White said.

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