

# Jobless filings mostly flat

Broader market trend suggests companies are laying off few workers.

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Associated Press

The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits ticked up 1,000 last week to a seasonally adjusted 326,000, a level consistent with steady job gains.

The Labor Department says the four-week average, a less volatile measure, fell for the third straight week to 331,500. Both figures are close to pre-recession levels and suggest that companies are laying off few workers.

Still, hiring will also need to pick up to make a dent in the still-high 6.7 percent unemployment rate. Many econo-

mists forecast that job gains will pick up a bit this year.

"An array of surveys tell us labor demand is rising, and we remain of the view that the underlying trend in payroll growth is slowly picking up," said Ian Shepherdson, an economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics.

One sour note in the report: Nearly 1.4 million people who have been unemployed longer than six months lost benefits in the week that ended Jan. 4, the latest period for which figures are available. That's because an emergency program that provided extended benefits expired Dec. 28.

The number of recipients fell to 3.7 million from 4.7 million in the previous week. About 300,000 people began receiving unemployment benefits in the week ended Jan. 4.

The total number of beneficiaries was already declining as those out of work either found jobs or exhausted their benefits. More than 5.6 million people were receiving aid a year ago. The program peaked with just over 11 million recipients in early 2010, about six months after the Great Recession ended.

The figures show that only about one-third of those out of work now receive aid. That's low by historical standards. The figure is usually closer to half.

More than 10 million people were unemployed in December. Benefits are available only to those who lose their jobs through no fault of their own. Those who quit or were fired for performance reasons or who have started looking for work after finishing school don't qualify for benefits.