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regional office in one of the food industry giant's nationwide layoffs last year.

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Dean Ash lost his six-figure income as a retail team leader at Kellogg Co.'s Tampa, Florida, regional office in one of the food industry giant's nationwide layoffs last year.

In the past 10 months, the Hunter's Green resident has applied for 300 jobs, participated in more than 50 telephone interviews, made it to a second round of interviews 30 times and was told he was a finalist on a half-dozen occasions. He remains jobless.

Ash, 54, got the last of his \$275 weekly state unemployment payments around Christmas — benefits funded by employers, not taxpayers.

Then, Congress failed to extend a 2008 program enacted when George W. Bush was president that provided long-term unemployment benefits with up to 47 weeks of compensation once state payments ran out, although a new bill could be introduced this month.

Ash has plenty of company among the long-term unemployed. Nearly 4 million people have been unemployed for more than six months out of a pool of 10 million U.S. unemployed at year's end, including 584,000 Floridians and more than 62,000 in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties.

When the federal Emergency Unemployment Compensation Program expired on Dec. 28, 73,000 Floridians and 1.3 million Americans no longer could get jobless benefits when their state-administered payments expired. That grew to 1.7 million by the beginning of February.

If some type of federal emergency unemployment is not restored, more than 260,000

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although he acknowledges he and his family have ridden an emotional roller coaster for months.

His wife works as a nanny, but they've tapped out their savings. Ash is dipping into his 401(k) retirement plan to support the family, which includes one youngster at home.

He heads to Rocky Point for a weekly career and job-finding session with two dozen fellow unemployed managers in a program paid by his Kellogg's severance package.

"We learn from each other's successes and setbacks, how we network, who we know that could possibly help one another," Ash said. "We all have common emotional experiences that are difficult for others to understand."

The phase out of the federal program for the long-term unemployed is not the only change jobless Floridians face.

Before 2012, the maximum duration of benefits on a state Reemployment Assistance claim was 26 weeks. Since then, the maximum duration was 23 weeks for 2012, 19 weeks for 2013 and 16 weeks for 2014.

A formula for calculating the annual maximum duration of benefits was enacted in 2011, effective 2012, based on the statewide unemployment rate average for the third calendar year quarter, said Jessica K. Sims, press secretary for the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.

Data shows unemployed across all ages, education, job and sociocultural backgrounds. A closer look indicates some presumed stereotypes of the jobless don't hold true, such as a unwillingness to look for work, take a pay cut, relocate, or pursue a new career path.

“You could have made generalizations 20 years ago, but at this point I don't see

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He made his way up the executive ladder with an accounting background. From the vantage point of a small company. Levy saw danger signs building in an economy that was peaking in the mid-2000s.

“Having been at the pinnacle of a small business rather than a midpoint of a big corporation gave me a different perspective, like being in the crow's nest of a small ship rather than on the side of a super vessel,” Levy said of the recession. “I saw it coming.”

Less business for a small company that has plentiful competition means fewer executives are needed, especially those whose salaries grew through years of experience.

“Who wants an unemployed, 50-year-old executive these days?” Levy asks.

At first, having time off was beneficial. But with health insurance costing \$1,800 a month and the need to support a family with a youngster, even with his savings and his wife's income as a legal secretary, Levy has been eager to return to the workforce.

Instead of challenging the odds by continuing to pursue leads in his previous career field, Levy chose to explore how becoming an entrepreneur could better pay off.

His first attempt at creating a product hit a wall, but now he's closing in on a partnership in providing business computer solutions that uses his accounting background.

“My time is up,” Levy said, confident that following an entrepreneurial path will pay off and he soon will return to work with his new business associate.

Others who work with the jobless also recognize that some people could do well

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involved with have lower income backgrounds. Their needs are urgent.

People want to work and are willing to accept less pay, if that's all that is available, she said. But making ends meet can be difficult if jobs pay little, are seasonal or are part-time.

Another issue that those with advanced or specialized skills face — let alone mid-or-upper level white collar professionals — in finding new work: Employers can be reluctant to consider people who they think would leave at their first opportunity for a higher-paying position.

“I met a single mom with an Associate Arts degree who took two temporary jobs that were available during the holidays and is taking a training class hoping to get a better clerical job,” Gaskin-Capehart said. “But she's having trouble right now finding anything permanent.”

Employers who attended a three-hour, late afternoon job fair on Feb. 12 that Republican U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis sponsored in Tarpon Springs told the fair coordinator they were pleased with the caliber of applicants, while applicants were excited about the variety of job opportunities, said Summer-Star Robertson, district director for the Congressman's office.

Despite a wicked storm that snarled traffic, 188 prospective employees attended, about half were women over the age of 40.

“Of this group of women, approximately 50 percent indicated that they currently had at least one job but considered themselves to be underemployed,” Robertson said. “They were seeking a better or an additional job.”

A job fair that Democratic U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor sponsored Feb. 17 at the Museum of Science and Industry in Tampa drew 1,031 people to visit 50 businesses.

“We did not expect this kind of turnout,” Castor said. “But we knew people are eager

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However, as a respondent on the Applicants website pointed out after the President's initiative, it is impossible for a candidate to know if he or she were rejected for a lack of experience versus being unemployed for a while.

But a recent Northeastern University study found employers would rather call someone with no relevant experience who's only been out of work for a few months than someone with more relevant experience who's been out of work for more than six months.

Congressional Democrats and a handful of Republicans have said in recent days they expect another long-term jobless extension bill will be introduced, but details of how long an extension and how it might be funded remain uncertain.

Four Republican senators voted to advance the legislation on Feb. 6, falling one short of backing the 55 Democratic senators to break a Republican filibuster to move forward.

One of those Republicans, U.S. Sen. Dean Heller of Nevada, is evaluating several possible approaches to moving forward with an extension of unemployment benefits, his communications director, Chandler Smith, said Thursday.

“He remains optimistic that legislation can ultimately pass the Senate,” Smith said. “House Speaker (John) Boehner indicated he was open to extending unemployment benefits as long as they are paid for. With both parties working together in good faith, it is possible to meet this requirement.”

Ash, the former Kellogg's manager, is not waiting for the government to respond. He is confident his energy in pursuit of a job and maintaining a sense of humor will pay off.

“I made up a T-shirt that says 'I'm Number 2,?'” Ash said about finishing second on

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