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Mar. 13, 2014

Economists liked the U.S. Labor Department's most recent report on the nation's job situation, cheered by news that payrolls expanded by 175,000 in February and unfazed by a slight rise in the unemployment rate to 6.7 percent, from 6.6 percent.

In a Center City classroom, Deborah Weston of West Philadelphia was also optimistic.

Laid off in July after 27 years at the same insurance company, Weston signed up for Step IT Up America, which promises jobs and paid training to African American women who want to get into information technology.

"This opportunity is a blessing," she said as she awaited an interview and an aptitude test.

Last Sunday, she filed for her final unemployment check, making her one of nearly 2 million Americans who have lost jobless benefits since Dec. 31, according to an analysis of Labor Department statistics by the National Employment Law Project, an advocacy group.

Until December, when Washington stopped funding for extended emergency benefits, unemployed people in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware were eligible for 63 weeks of benefits, with the last 37 weeks funded by the federal government.

Now, just 26 weeks of state-funded benefits are available, and Weston is just finishing hers. "I think Congress should extend unemployment benefits or create more jobs," she said. "There are just not enough good-paying jobs."

A bill introduced Tuesday could come up for a vote in the U.S. Senate next week.

On Friday, the Labor Department reported that in February construction added

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Overall, jobs were added in education and health care, but there were cuts in hospital and home health service employment. Government hiring, which had been declining over the last year, picked up, with gains in state and local government employment offsetting declines in federal jobs.

The stock market reacted favorably. The Standard & Poor's 500 rose 1.01 point, or 0.5 percent, enough to set its latest record high, 1,878. The Dow Jones industrial average rose 30.83 points, or 0.19 percent, to 16,452.

Weather was a factor in the February report, particularly noticeable in a drop in hours worked by production and non-supervisory employees, said Doug Handler, chief economist at IHS Global Insight, a Colorado-based economics company.

“February's adverse weather will probably shave first-quarter growth by around 0.2 percentage points — enough to matter, but not enough to materially reshape the overall economic outlook,” Handler wrote in a statement.

The number of unemployed rose by 223,000, to 10.5 million. Of those, 3.8 million have been out of work for more than 27 weeks; the number of long-term unemployed grew by 203,000 in February.

Adding in people too discouraged to find work and those forced to work part time when they'd rather work full time, the unemployment rate is 12.6 percent, down slightly from 12.7 percent in January and down from 14.3 percent a year ago.

“I've been struggling,” said Lisa V. Outterbridge of Germantown. On Feb. 26, 2010, she said, she lost a job as a medical-research technician affiliated with Temple University's Fels Institute for Cancer Research.

Since then, she has been steadily looking for work but fell into a depression in December when, she said, Target told her that her degree in chemistry and years as a

researcher made her overqualified to stock shelves as a seasonal worker for the

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train and employ 5,000 minority women — including 100 from the Philadelphia area — and help them find jobs with their clients.

Outterbridge said that she and her husband struggled to keep their daughter in college, but that their house is up for short sale and they've moved to an apartment.

“I just don't understand why it's so hard to get a job,” she said.

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