

Employment trend remains strong, despite post-holiday job losses

By Tim Sheehan



Though there was a rise in unemployment in Fresno County, experts say it was a seasonal lurch. MIKE GROLL — AP

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Seasonal unemployment swing

- The unemployment rate in Fresno County rose to 12.1% in January, up from 11.2% in December.

- The loss of seasonal holiday retail jobs was a major factor in the month-to-month unemployment increase.

- Over the long-term, January marked 40 straight months in which the unemployment rate was lower than it was a year earlier.



Fresno County's employment trend remains strong, despite post-holiday job losses that showed up in the January unemployment report.

About 1,200 retail jobs — many likely holiday-season positions — evaporated between December and January, contributing to an upward lurch in the county's unemployment rate to 12.1% in the first month of the year.

Nearly all of Fresno County's major industry sectors saw fewer jobs at the start of the year than in the previous month, according to figures released Tuesday by the state Employment Development Department.

But while the month-to-month rate went up from 11.2% in December, January's unemployment rate was still 1.7 percentage points below the first month of 2014, marking the 40th consecutive month of year-over-year improvement since the depths of the recession a few years ago.

Similar patterns prevailed in neighboring counties in the central San Joaquin Valley, with unemployment rates ranging from 11.8% in Madera County to 14% in Merced County.

It's typical for Fresno County's unemployment rate to rise between December and January according to averages over the past 10 years, said Diane Patterson, an EDD spokeswoman in Sacramento. "This rise in unemployment is very normal, very seasonal," she said. "The number of people in the labor force goes up, and you have students coming back from winter break, and not all of those people will become gainfully employed."

Other industries reporting sizable decreases in jobs were private-sector education/health services, where payrolls were trimmed by about 1,000 positions; and business/professional services such as waste management, accountants, attorneys and consultants, with 500 fewer jobs.

Across Fresno, Kings, Madera, Merced and Tulare counties, the number of people who wanted work but couldn't find jobs in January numbered 112,500, down about 13,000 from a year ago, according to the state estimates. In the meantime, the number of employed rose to 766,900 in January — almost 20,000 more than January 2013.

The state's estimates of industry jobs is based on surveys of employers, while the unemployment statistics are the result of surveys of households, Patterson said. Neither set of surveys distinguishes between part-time or full-time work, or accounts for how many people may hold more than one job.

The official unemployment rate also doesn't count people who are not in the labor force at the time of the surveys. Those may include students who are in school instead of working, or discouraged workers who have given up their search for a job.

California's statewide unemployment rate was estimated at 6.9% for January, down from 7.1% in December. Nationally, the January unemployment rate was 5.7% and fell to 5.5% in February. The February unemployment rate for California and its counties won't be available until later this month.

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