

## Florida unemployment climbs to 11.2 percent in October

Contributed by BILL KACZOR

TALLAHASSEE (AP) — Florida's unemployment rate continued its steady upward climb in October to 11.2 percent — a mark last seen in the 1970s and a tenth of a percentage point higher than September's adjusted rate, state officials said recently.

The number of unemployed Floridians topped 1 million in September for the first time. It remained slightly over that mark in October at just over 1 million out of a labor force of nearly 9.2 million.

Florida's October rate was the seventh highest — tied with Kentucky — among the 50 states and District of Columbia and exceeded the national figure by a full percentage point. It was Florida's highest since June 1975, when it also was 11.2 percent. The last time it was higher was 11.9 percent in May 1975. It's up 4.3 percentage points from October 2008.

“This rate indicates that Florida's families and businesses are still facing challenges, while fewer job losses reveal slight improvement in the economic climate,” said Agency for Workforce Innovation Director Cynthia R. Lorenzo.

While the state is continuing to shed jobs, the loss rate has dropped. Florida had 339,600 fewer nonagricultural jobs in October than the same month last year. That's a decline of 4.4 percent compared to 5.4 percent for September.

Three sectors of Florida's economy have been hardest hit: Trade, transportation and utilities; professional and business services; and construction account for more than two-thirds of the state's job losses. Health care has been the only growth sector for most of the year.

September's rate initially had been announced as 11 percent but later was adjusted to 11.1 percent.

If not for the state's declining labor force — down by 25,000 in October and 142,000 over the year — the unemployment rate would have been even higher, said Agency for Workforce Innovation economist Rebecca Rust. She said those who have given up looking for work include people who have decided to retire early, go back to school, or leave Florida.

The employment picture isn't expected to start improving until the second quarter of next year, Rust said.

Democrats cited the latest figures to renew their criticism of the Republican-controlled Legislature's refusal so far to accept \$444 million in additional federal stimulus dollars for unemployment compensation.

To get that money, though, Florida would have to “modernize” its unemployment compensation laws. That would increase benefits for some jobless workers and provide them for some who don't currently qualify. That includes those who quit for compelling family reasons such as avoiding domestic violence, accompanying a military spouse who has been transferred and tending to a sick relative.

Figures in a Senate study issued last month indicate between 27,000 and 40,000 workers might benefit.

“The Republican leadership in the Florida House has turned its back on countless citizens who see the need for helping jobless Floridians,” said House Democratic Leader Franklin Sands of Weston.

Republicans say modernization would eventually result in higher unemployment compensation taxes paid by businesses once the stimulus dollars run out.

“House Democrats' priority seems to be taking more federal stimulus dollars and obligating Florida workers and businesses to federal mandates that will raise taxes and have long-term negative consequences,” said Majority Leader Adam Hasner of Delray Beach.

The Senate report says stimulus dollars would offset the costs of modernization for six years before those expenses are passed on to private employers. The stimulus money, though, would not cover \$4.4 million in annual costs for state and local governments, which are exempt from the tax.

The state last week announced the unemployment tax will increase dramatically next year. The minimum will go from \$8.40 per employee to \$100.30 while the maximum is set to climb from \$378 to \$459.

Gov. Charlie Crist's opponent for the Republican U.S. Senate nomination, former House Speaker Marco Rubio, issued a statement criticizing him for holding a fundraiser in Washington, D.C., as the new jobless figures were released.

“Gov. Crist should focus on actually doing his job and working to put Floridians back to work,” Rubio said.

Crist said in a telephone interview that Rubio spoke too soon. He said after the fundraiser he met with Sen. George LeMieux, R-Fla., about getting federal stimulus dollars for a proposed high-speed rail project that would boost Florida's economy and create jobs.

“It's easy to take shots from the sidelines,” Crist said. “I'm in the arena.”