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White collars fare better than blue

State unemployment rate is up, but more highly skilled sectors adding jobs

by Kevin James Shay | Staff Writer

While the unemployment rate in Maryland and the nation continues to rise, industries such as health care, high-tech and science have added jobs in substantial numbers in the past year.

Despite the tougher economic times, skilled professionals remain in demand, said Robert McGovern, CEO of McLean, Va., career information company Jobfox. While the national unemployment rate rose to 6.5 percent in October, the unemployment rate for professionals with college degrees remains "manageable" at 3.1 percent, he said.

Industries such as manufacturing, construction and retail continue to shed jobs. But others, such as health care, have added employment and retained a shortage of employees.

At Adventist HealthCare of Rockville, which includes Shady Grove Adventist and Washington Adventist hospitals in Rockville and Takoma Park, respectively, Maryland employment has remained at about 6,700, the same as a year ago, said Thomas Grant, a spokesman. Adventist is recruiting new workers, especially in patient care, he said.

Maryland's registered nursing vacancy rate last year of 9.6 percent was higher than the national rate of 8 percent, although the state's rate declined from 13 percent in 2006, according to a recent Maryland Hospital Association report.

Even though the nursing vacancy rate declined last year, that rate will climb unless the situation is adequately addressed, said Catherine Crowley, vice president of the hospital association. "While a slower economy is bringing some nurses back to work, our workforce is still aging," she said.

The association is working with nursing schools and others to increase training programs. Among the schools expanding is the Universities at Shady Grove in Rockville, where officials project that enrollment in the undergraduate nursing program will about double in the next five years.

Vacancy rates climbed for hospital occupations such as respiratory therapists, pharmacists, dieticians and lab technicians, but the overall hospital employees' vacancy

rate in Maryland decreased to 10 percent in 2007 from 11.2 percent in 2006. Among the declining occupations was physician, whose vacancy rate dropped to 6.7 percent from 7.3 percent.

Other job gains in tech, education

Though Maryland lost 1,600 jobs in October from September, the state has still added 23,000 jobs in the past year, according to U.S. Department of Labor figures. That's a contrast from what has occurred nationwide, with some 1.1 million positions being lost in the past year, including 240,000 in October.

As always, some states are faring better than others. Texas has gained the most jobs since October 2007 with 230,400. Florida and California have lost the most, 156,200 and 101,300, respectively. States near Maryland that have posted employment gains include Virginia, up 20,600, and West Virginia, up 1,600. States with job losses include Pennsylvania, down 16,000, and New Jersey, down 18,400.

In Maryland, health care and social work has been the most robust industry, in terms of job growth. That sector added 6,700 jobs, or a 2.2 percent increase, in the past year, according to labor department figures.

In the Maryland-Washington region, the occupations that were in greatest demand last month were accountants, intelligence analysts, computer software designers, computer network administrators and sales executives, based on employer job postings tracked by Jobfox.

While Maryland has a relatively highly skilled workforce, the state needs to do more to cultivate it as the needs will increase due to the influx of jobs from the Pentagon Base Realignment and Closure program, according to a recent report from the Governor's Workforce Investment Board. The report recommended expanding pre-college science programs and career technology programs in high schools, and recruiting retired government workers and veterans to fill certain BRAC jobs.

Maryland's nonfarm business payrolls declined in construction, manufacturing and retail, as the closing of three Boscov's department stores contributed to a "larger than anticipated reduction" in the retail sector, according to a state labor bureau statement. The biggest job loss in the past year was in manufacturing, which declined by 4,700 jobs, or 3.6 percent.

It's a mixed bag for bill collectors, who are seeing more work from clients such as cash-strapped banks but finding it harder to squeeze money out of debtors, according to a new survey by Rockville accounts receivable management advisory company Kaulkin Ginsberg.

Some agencies have modified their collection strategies to emphasize down payments and periodic payments.

"Middle-class America is out of money," said one survey respondent. "The only thing leading the pack is our litigation debt."

Jobless rate up in the state

Maryland's unemployment rate continued to rise last month, jumping to a seasonally adjusted 5.0 percent from 4.6 percent in September and 3.6 percent a year ago, the U.S. Department of Labor reported last week.

The number of unemployed people in Maryland has increased by 38 percent in the past year to 149,000. However, the state jobless rate is still lower than the national rate. Seasonally-adjusted initial unemployment claims across the U.S. in the week ending Saturday actually declined by 14,000 to 529,000 from the previous week, according to federal figures. However, the four-week moving average was 518,000, up 11,000 from the previous week's revised average of 507,000.

"While we continue to fare better than the nation as a whole, Maryland is not immune to the ripples caused by the housing crisis and the credit market meltdown," Thomas E. Perez, secretary of the state's Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, said in a statement.

The unemployment rate increased to 5.0 percent in Maryland last month from 4.6 percent in September. The state rate is still lower than the national rate of 6.5 percent.