

Unemployment claims jump unexpectedly

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NEW YORK (CNNMoney.com) -- The number of Americans filing for initial unemployment insurance jumped last week, the government said Thursday, with a figure that was above analysts' expectations.

There were 474,000 initial job claims filed in the week ended Dec. 5, up 17,000 from the previous week's unrevised 457,000, the lowest level since September 2008, the Labor Department said in its weekly report.

A consensus estimate of economists surveyed by Briefing.com expected 455,000 new claims.

The 4-week moving average of initial claims was 473,750, down 7,750 from the previous week's revised average of 481,500

"Today's number is less surprising than last week's and takes the wind out of the sails for hopes of a super fast recovery. But 474,000 would have been a welcoming number not too long ago." Said Tim Quinlan, economist at Wells Fargo. "We're still seeing a gradual, relative improvement in the job market."

Continuing claims: The government said 5,157,000 people filed continuing claims in the week ended Nov. 28, the most recent data available. That's 303,000 down from the preceding week's revised 5,460,000 claims.

The 4-week moving average for ongoing claims fell by 123,500 to 5,416,500 from the previous week's revised 5,540,000.

But the slide may signal that more filers are dropping off those rolls into extended benefits.

Continuing claims reflect people filing each week after their initial claim until the end of their standard benefits, which usually last 26 weeks. The figures do not include those who have moved to state or federal extensions, or people whose benefits have expired.

Congress passed legislation last month to extend federally paid benefits up to 99 weeks depending on the state, but the law only helps those who exhaust the unemployment lifelines by the year's end.

Lawmakers in the House and the Senate introduced bills last week to push the deadline to apply for unemployment benefits as far back as 2011.

State-by-state: Jobless claims in 21 states declined by more than 1,000 for the week ended Nov. 28, the most recent data available. Claims in California dropped the most, by 28,672, which the state attributed to a shorter work week due to the Thanksgiving holiday and fewer layoffs in the service industry.

Seven states said the claims increased by more than 1,000. Claims in Wisconsin jumped by 8,067, which a state-supplied comment said was due to layoffs in the construction, service and manufacturing industries.

Outlook. While claims popped from their downward trajectory, Quinlan said the figure is lower than the number filed in October and most of November, and a significant improvement from the filings in March that were above 600,000.

"One week is not a trend maker," said Quinlan, adding that when claims fell from 580,000 to 534,000 between mid-August and mid-September, they jumped back up above 550,000 in the last week of September before declining again.

"We've seen a recovery in every sector of the economy except the job market, and now that last segment is finally falling into place," he said. "The second half of 2009 has been characterized by a slowing in the pace of job losses. The first half of 2010, we should see actual job growth." ■