Claims for jobless aid suggest modest hiring

By Christopher S. Rugaber
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits jumped 20,000 last week to a seasonally adjusted 362,000, though it remains at a level that suggests slow but steady improvement in the job market.

The Labor Department said Thursday that the four-week average, a less volatile measure, rose 8,000 to 360,750, the highest in six weeks. A department spokesman said heavy snowstorms in the Northeast didn't affect the total.

Applications for unemployment benefits are a proxy for layoffs. Even with last week's jump, they have trended downward recently. The four-week average has declined 7.5 percent since mid-November and fell three weeks ago to a five-year low.

Weekly applications "continue to show no sign of trending up," Jim O'Sullivan, an economist at High Frequency Economics, wrote in a research note. "That is a good sign ... consistent with the recent pace in employment growth at least being maintained."

Employers added an average of 200,000 jobs a month from November through January. That was up from about 150,000 in the previous three months.

Last week's increase puts applications for unemployment benefits back in the 360,000-to-390,000 range, where they have fluctuated since early last year.

In January, the economy added 157,000 jobs. The jobless rate ticked up to 7.9 percent from 7.8 percent in December.