

Abel Villanueva, Miguel Gollegos and Fidencio Perez of Angela Drywall install ceiling board in a garage. The Tampa, Fla., business is having trouble finding enough workers. MATT MARRIOTT/USA TODAY

Lack of workers hurts construction

Recovery slows as builders need crews

By Paul Davidson
USA Today

The construction industry shed 2.2 million workers between January 2007 and last year.

So now there's an overabundance of them eager for jobs, right? Wrong.

Contractors are struggling with shortages of workers as the home-building market comes to life and some commercial sectors strengthen.

The crunch is affecting a handful of states, including Texas, Arizona, Iowa and Florida. But it's expected to worsen and spread across the U.S. over the next few years, building officials said. The shortages are already prompting builders to raid each other's job sites for workers.

"It has been a shock for us," said Milton Chicas, who heads recruiting for Wayne Bros., a Kannapolis, N.C.-based commercial builder in the Southeast. "There are so many folks out of work right now, we thought we were going to have a large amount of individuals coming through the door."

During the downturn, hundreds of thousands of laid-off construction workers left the field, retired or moved to other states to find work, leaving some markets without an adequate supply for even the current moderate upswing in activity.

After scrounging for odd jobs and hoping for an upturn, many workers retooled to become truck drivers, factory workers or roughnecks in the nation's booming oil and natural gas fields.

Meanwhile, baby boomers are retiring and fewer high school graduates are entering the field. The result is a widening gap between construction labor demand and supply in some areas.

Nationally, building-permit applications for homes and apartments this year are up 31 percent over 2011, though they're still well below average. All construction spending, including commercial and government, was up 14 percent in September.

Yet construction payrolls are virtually unchanged from two years ago at 5.5 million.