Most jobs in 3 years added in March

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WASHINGTON — The nation's economy posted its largest job gain in three years in March, while the unemployment rate remained at 9.7 percent for the third straight month.

The increase in payrolls is the latest sign that the economic recovery is gaining momentum and healing in the job market is beginning. Still, the healing is likely to be slow, and most economists don't expect new hiring to be fast enough this year to rapidly reduce unemployment.

The Labor Department said employers added 162,000 jobs in March, the most since the recession began but below analysts' expectations of 190,000. The total includes 48,000 temporary workers hired for the U.S. Census, also fewer than many economists forecast.

Private employers added 123,000 jobs, the most since May 2007.

"It's just the beginning of a rise in private hiring that will help sustain the recovery," said Stuart Hoffman, chief economist at PNC Financial Services Group. "They're not big numbers, but they're welcome numbers."

Still, there are 15 million Americans out of work, roughly double the total before the recession began in December 2007.

The economy likely began recovering in the middle of last year, but is only now showing modest job gains.

"It is still disappointing that it took roughly nine months before we started to see any meaningful rebound" in jobs, Paul Ashworth, senior U.S. economist at Capital Economics, wrote in a note to clients.

Manufacturers added 17,000 jobs, the third straight month of gains. Temporary help services added 40,000, while health care added 37,000. Leisure and hospitality added 22,000.

Even the beleaguered construction industry added 15,000 positions, though that likely reflects a rebound from February, when major snowstorms may have kept many construction workers off payrolls.

The average work week increased to 34 hours from 33.9, a positive sign. Most employers are likely to work current employees longer before they hire new workers.

The department also revised January's job total to show a gain of 14,000, up from a previously reported loss of 26,000.



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In this March photo, job seekers wait in line to attend a career fair put on by National CareerFairs in San Jose, Calif. The nation's economy created the largest number of jobs last month since the recession began.