277K jobs added in February

By Christopher S. Rugaber
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States added 227,000 jobs in February, the latest display of the breadth and strength of the economic recovery. The country has put together the most impressive three months of job growth since before the Great Recession.

The unemployment rate stayed at 8.3 percent. It was the first time in six months it didn't fall, and that was because a half-million Americans started looking for work. In the past two months, almost a million have started looking.

"I have more optimism," said Freda Bratcher, 54, who had worked as a substance abuse counselor but has been unemployed 16 months. She had stopped searching, but showed up Friday at a Miami career center after some of her friends landed jobs.

"There's something out there for me," she said. "And if other people are getting hired, then why not me?"

The Labor Department, in its monthly jobs report, said Friday that December and January, already two of the best months for jobs since the recession, were even stronger than first estimated.

January job growth was revised higher by 41,000 to 284,000. December job growth was raised by 20,000 to 223,000. The overall job growth for February of 227,000 beat economists' estimate of 210,000.

"It's a very strong report," said Bob Baur, chief global economist at Principal Global Investors, an asset management company. "I could hardly find anything not to like in it."

Since the beginning of December, the country has added 734,000 jobs. The only three-month stretch that was better since the recession ended was March through May 2010,

See HIRING, Page 3A

Strong 3 months of hiring in US

HIRING

Continued from Page 1A

when the government was hiring tens of thousands of temporary workers for the census.

Before that, the last stretch that was better was February through April 2006. A three-month gain of 734,000 is roughly what the country was achieving in the late 1990s, although it is less impressive now because the country holds about 40 million more people.

Stocks rose after the report came out, though they lost most of their gains later in the day. The Dow Jones industrial average closed up 14 points at 12,922. Last week, it closed above 13,000 for the first time since May 2008, four months before the financial crisis.

The improving jobs picture figures to improve the re-election chances for President Barack Obama and to complicate the political strategy for the Republicans competing for the right to replace him.

Obama on Friday visited a manufacturing plant run by Rolls-Royce, a maker of aircraft engines, in Virginia, a state expected to be closely contested in November. He told workers there that American manufacturing is adding jobs for the first time since the 1990s.

"The economy is getting stronger," the president said. "When I come to places like this and I see the work that's being done, it gives me confidence there are better days ahead. I would bet on American workers and American know-how any day of the week."

Mitt Romney, the leader in delegates among Obama's would-be challengers, did not directly address the fresh economic data at a stop in Mississippi, but he criticized Obama for failing to bring the unemployment rate below 8 percent.

The unemployment rate has remained above 8 percent since February 2009, a month after Obama's inauguration, a point regularly hammered by Romney. But as more jobs are created, it is increasingly likely that the rate will fall below 8 percent by Election Day.

Matt McDonald, a partner at Hamilton Place Strategies and former Bush White House official, calculates that the economy needs to add about 185,000 jobs per month to get to that point.

"It will be a photo finish to get below 8," he said.

Hiring in February was broad-based and improved in both high-paying and low-paying industries. The industries of manufacturing, professional services and health care all added jobs.

And government — federal, state and local — cut only 6,000 jobs in February and a revised 1,000 in January. Last year, government cut an average of 22,000 jobs a month, taking some of the economic punch out of job creation in the private sector.

The small government losses meant the private sector added 233,000 jobs in February.

In all, 142.1 million Americans reported that they had a job in February, the highest since January 2009, during the depths of the recession. The low was 138 million, in December 2009.

The government uses a survey of mostly large businesses and government agencies to determine how many jobs are added or lost each month. That is the survey that produced the 227,000 number. But the payroll survey tends to undercount small businesses and does not count the self-employed.

It uses a separate survey of American households to calculate the unemployment rate. That survey picks up hiring by companies of all sizes, including small businesses, companies being started, farm workers and the self-employed.

The household survey found that 428,000 more Americans reported having a job in February.

When the economy is improving, many economists say, the household survey does the better job of picking it up because it detects small business hiring.

Over the past three months, the household survey has shown that the number of employed people has risen by 1.45 million, the biggest three-month gain since 2000.