

[back to article](#)

Printed on page A1

# Outlook on jobs worsens

By [Michael Pollick](#)*Published: Saturday, October 18, 2008 at 1:00 a.m.*

The number of workers without paychecks in Southwest Florida inched upward in September. Meanwhile, one of Florida's top economists warned not to expect any sudden miracles to change that trend.

The Florida jobless rate for September was unchanged at 6.6 percent of the labor force, according to a state report, but that was only after officials bumped up the August rate by a tenth of a point from the 6.5 percent that they previously reported.

Rates in Sarasota, Manatee and Charlotte counties remained at even more troubling levels:

Charlotte County is at 9.5 percent, up from 9.2 percent in August and 6.3 percent a year ago.

Manatee County is at 7.4 percent, unchanged from August and up from 4.4 percent a year ago.

Sarasota County is at 7.6 percent, up from 7.3 percent in August and 5.1 percent a year ago.

In all, 31,718 people were officially unemployed in Sarasota, Manatee and Charlotte counties as of September. That is an increase of 11,356, or 56 percent, from a year ago, according to statistics from the state's Agency for Workforce Innovation released Friday.

Official unemployment rates and statistics understate the reality. They exclude people whose hours have been cut, those who have run out of benefits or who have stopped looking, or who have found a job but are underemployed.

"We now expect a deeper and longer recession for Florida than we did back in the early part of this year," said economist Stan Geberer at Fishkind & Associates, an Orlando-based consulting firm. "Because this recession is centered in housing and finance, which Florida relies on so heavily, it is going to take us a little longer to come out of the recession than other parts of the country, and our unemployment rate is going to remain higher longer."

Faced with scaled-back orders, manufacturing operations are still tightening their payrolls.

Four months ago, Peter Straw, executive director of the Sarasota-Manatee Area Manufacturers Association, told the Herald-Tribune that manufacturing operations were "as lean as it can get."

But layoffs are still happening, and Straw agrees that picture has changed.

The latest was this week, when Tropicana Products said it would trim its Bradenton work force by 40 people as part of a 3,300-job reduction by parent company PepsiCo Inc.

"There are some companies that are cutting-edge high tech that are adding jobs, but for the bulk of manufacturing, hiring is stagnant and we are seeing some layoffs," Straw said.

A job fair held Wednesday in Manatee County provided a portrait of an economy in which people are looking hard for new jobs, at the same time that employers display less of a need to find help.

A year ago, the fall job fair held by the Manatee Chamber of Commerce filled 60 booths with participating companies and organizations. This week, it was fewer than 40 booths.

This year's fair drew at least 2,500 job seekers, about 1,000 more than last year, according to Jacki Dezelski, vice president of community development at the chamber.

The region's technical schools and community colleges are seeing a surge in enrollment as out-of-work and underemployed people seek to upgrade their skills or their certification level.

Manatee Technical Institute's enrollment has risen 19 percent from a year ago.

"We have people walking in the door every day who have lost their jobs and are looking to do some retraining," said Manatee Technical Institute spokeswoman Maura Howl.

Through the school's financial aid counselor, she said, students facing hardships have been able to get full or partial reimbursement for tuition and books.

Popular courses for the disenfranchised: medical assistant, accountant or bookkeeper, automotive technician, Web designer, computer network tech.

Looks like a longer road

So where is this economic saga going and how long will it take to get to the good part?

Late in 2007 and early in 2008, the Fishkind firm had been predicting a shallow recession, perhaps two quarters long, that would be over by the end of this year.

Like everybody else in business in the United States, Fishkind has had to go back to the drawing board based on the tumultuous events that have occurred since then.

Just to name a few, the federal government has been forced to take over two huge corporations considered essential to the mortgage finance business, Fannie Mae and Freddie

Mac. Between the government and the Federal Reserve, a bevy of other takeovers, cash infusions, and bailouts in the hundreds of billions of dollars have either occurred or are in the works.

Meanwhile, the credit markets have frozen because of lack of trust between financial institutions about the quality of each other's paper, and the stock market has taken a one-year 43-percent dive, as measured by the Standard & Poor's 500-stock Index.

In 2007, as residential home and condo sales slowed dramatically, the state started losing construction jobs, followed by financial positions related to real estate, such as mortgage broker.

"As long as we felt the employment losses were contained to those areas, it corresponded to a cyclical downturn in our view, but nothing drastic or dramatic," Geberer said.

"I think what we have seen in the unfolding of the rest of 2008 is that those job losses have spread out well beyond construction and finance to include retailing, manufacturing, services."

Health care, government and education are holding up well. Government and public education jobs could still take a hit because of declines in property tax revenues, he added.

This story appeared in print on page A1