

State's jobless rate falls to 5.5%

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BOSTON (AP) -- The Massachusetts unemployment rate dipped to 5.5 percent in June, the lowest level in nearly six years, the state office of Labor and Workforce Development reported Thursday.

Preliminary estimates from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics showed Massachusetts picked up 3,700 jobs last month, officials said.

The bureau also revised upward its May estimate, saying the state gained 10,300 jobs in that month rather than the previously reported increase of 9,100 jobs.

The job gains were driven by the addition of 6,000 jobs in the education and health-services arena, one of the state's biggest employment bases and a sector that has added more than 20,000 jobs over the past year.

But the latest state report also indicated that manufacturing continued to be a soft spot in the Massachusetts economy. The manufacturing sector lost 1,100 jobs in June, and has lost a net 1,600 jobs over the past 12 months.

Steve Sawin, president and CEO of Operon Resource Management, a Lowell-based staffing company that specializes in supporting health-care product manufacturers, said the decline in manufacturing jobs could be attributed to the lack of enough trained and skilled workers to fill open positions at manufacturing facilities.

"Manufacturing jobs today are nothing like those of the past -- they are technically advanced, complex and require special skills," he said in a statement. "To keep our economy growing, we need our vocational schools and community colleges to better align their programs with the surrounding business community to ensure there are trained workers ready to fill open positions in the manufacturing sector."

The state's total labor force decreased by 500 in June from the previous month, with 6,000 more residents employed and 6,500 fewer residents reported out of work.

The unemployment rate, which is calculated separately from the jobs data, dropped one-tenth of a point from the 5.6 percent rate in May. The rate was the lowest since August 2008, when it also stood at 5.5 percent.

The rate has fallen sharply since June 2013, when the state posted a 7.1 percent rate, slightly above the national average at that time. Massachusetts has added nearly 50,000 private sector jobs in the past 12 months, officials said.

The U.S. unemployment rate dipped to 6.3 percent in June, from 6.1 percent in May, the Labor Department reported earlier this month.

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