

Unemployment Applications Drop to Nine Month Low

The number of people applying for unemployment benefits has dropped to its lowest level in nine months.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that applications were down by 23,000 to a seasonally adjusted 381,000. That's the lowest number of applications since February.

The four-week average, a less volatile measure, fell for the ninth time in 11 weeks to 393,250. That's the lowest average since early April.

Some economists say the report is another sign the job market is slowly improving.

"There have been numerous indications that the labor market is healing and today's jobless claims report only reinforces that view," Dan Greenhaus, chief global strategist at the trading firm BTIG.

Two weeks ago, the unemployment rate fell to 8.6 in November, according to the government. However, the unemployment rate dropped last month, in part because more people gave up looking for work.

Once the unemployed stop looking for work, they are no longer counted as unemployed.

Congress continues to debate whether to continue the extended benefit program, which expires at the end of this year.

The Labor Department estimates that about 1.8 million people could lose benefits by early February if the program is not extended.