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Utah job losses total 197,000

Utah behind pre-recession levels of employment

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Gov. Gary Herbert speaks Tuesday at a meeting of the Dixie Republican Forum in St. George. / DAVID DEMILLE / THE SPECTRUM

ST. GEORGE Â- Jobs lost during the recession, combined with an influx of new high school and college graduates, mean Utah is 197,000 jobs behind its pre-recession levels of employment, according to a new report from youth-advocacy group Voices for Utah Children.

More than 72,000 jobs have been lost since 2007, according to the report, which analyzed data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics. According to the report, Utah's young workers suffered from 14.7 percent unemployment in 2010, compared to 8.2 percent for all workers.

Gov. Gary Herbert has proposed an initiative to grow Utah jobs in the near future, but authors of the study indicate that more help might be needed to accommodate new workers.

"This is a bigger problem than most people realize because 25,000 additional young people every year need to find work to support themselves and their families," said Allison Rowland, director of research and budget for VUC and lead author of the report. "Unless we start making the right investments in our state's future, the problem is going to get worse."

Jon Thomas, a 23-year-old student at Dixie State College, said the news is not surprising, given that many people he knows are unsure of what to do once they graduate. It is a problem for Utah, he said, because many talented people leave the state in search of opportunities elsewhere.

"The reason they're going to leave is they don't have anything available to them here," he said.

Thomas has helped start a local movement called Occupy St. George, made up of a group of locals concerned about economic inequalities and their lack of job prospects.

"We're trying to let the people know that we too are suffering, the young people," he said.

Last month, Herbert announced a goal to grow 100,000 Utah jobs in the next three years. His 12-member economic development council is looking at ways to encourage private sector job growth.

At a meeting in St. George last week, Herbert maintained that Utah is trending toward sustainable growth, based on business-friendly policies and proactive recruitment of new companies. He said all sectors are seeing growth, with the exception of government jobs - job growth was nearly 3 percent in the year that ended Sept. 30, according to Utah Department of Workforce Services figures.

The state is also one of only nine with AAA bond ratings, and Utah's unemployment rate is close to 2 percentage points below the national average.

"I don't think there's ever been a time when more people were looking at Utah as an example of how to get things done," Herbert said.

While Rowland said she supports Herbert's efforts, she reiterated that she thought more was needed.

"Utah needs 197,000 jobs right now, not just 100,000," she said. "And we'll need another 25,000 on top of that by the end of 2012."