The LEADER

OPINION

MONDAY | APRIL 16 | 2012 | PAGE 4A

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Wanted: Jobs

When the United States was in recession three decades ago, middle-age industrial workers were the biggest losers. The most recent recession and hesitant recovery, though, has hammered the young, as the government's disappointing monthly employment report showed again last week.

For many of America's younger workers, opportunity is scarce and financial independence is a dream. The labor market's recent upswing has barely kept pace with population growth. The young continue to suffer substantially larger income losses than other age groups. Those who are ages 16 to 29 are less likely to be employed than at any time since World War II.

The outlook is worrisome. Long stretches of unemployment early in a young person's work life can undermine future earnings, productivity and career prospects. Debt-strapped Europe is turning into Exhibit A of this phenomenon: In Spain, half of young adults have no job. In Italy, the figure is 30 percent. In Portugal, where youth unemployment runs 28 percent, young professionals are fleeing to Brazil and former Portuguese colonies in Africa.

The jobless rate for young workers in the U.S. typically runs above the rate for those in the prime working ages of 25 to 64. But the latest recession brought about the highest rate of unemployment ever recorded for 16- to 24-year-olds. At the end of 2011, their jobless rate stood at 16.3 percent, almost double the rate overall.

So far this year, youth have made no real progress: For those 16 to 19 years old, the unemployment rate rose to 25 percent in March, up from 23.8 percent in February and 23.2 percent in January. For 20- to 24-year-olds, it stood at 13.2 percent, down from 13.8 percent in February and 13.3 percent in January.

Why is unemployment so much worse for youth than for Americans at large? (The nation's jobless rate is 8.2 percent.) There are a few reasons.

This was a severe recession, especially for the low-paying retail and hospitality industries, which typically employ the young. Factor in the effects of automation, and the financial imperative for employers to keep their workforces lean, and it's no wonder the supply of unskilled and low-skilled jobs dried up.

At the same time, older adults were competing more than usual for those retail clerk and bartending positions. The economic downturn wiped out home equity at the same time jobs became scarce. Retirement plans were upended. Many Americans took whatever work they could find, and labor participation rates for the old went higher even as those for the young declined. Gramps wasn't making room for Junior.

Perhaps the worst part of the youth employment picture is the state of education and job training. While the nation's college-educated youth face a tough labor market and alarming levels of student debt, the unemployment rate for those without degrees runs far higher. Those with the least education consistently fare the worst.

The problem isn't so much sheepskins as skills: Plenty of Americans make a good living without having graduated from college, but only if they can do something of value – whether it's fitting pipes or operating computer programs. It's painful to hear small-business owners lament the lack of readiness they see among young job candidates.

The U.S. can't afford to do nothing while the chips fall disproportionately on this vulnerable part of its population. From a policy standpoint, the state of affairs argues for smarter investments in education and job training. One promising approach: Mayor Rahm Emanuel's plans to retool City Colleges of Chicago so each campus focuses on a job sector and works closely with employers in that sector. The Aspen Institute has encouraged similar efforts to tailor education to identifiable job demands at community colleges around the country. Too many young people jump in and out of two-year and four-year college programs without gaining a degree or a marketable skill.

One ray of hope: Younger Americans in the aftermath of recessions tend to be unemployed for shorter durations than those displaced from the working world later in life. The high unemployment rate for youth reflects less of the grinding, long-term unemployment that has led older Americans to despair of ever working again.

ARTIST'S VIEW

COMMENTARY | SEN. TOM O'MARA

The jobs beat goes on

"Today's budget agreement is another clear signal that it is not business as usual in Albany. There is a commitment to promoting private-sector job growth and unlocking New York State's true economic potential."

Those were the words of Brian Sampson of Unshackle Upstate, a leading upstate New York advocacy group, assessing the end-of-March agreement on the final 2012-2013 New York State budget. This year's budget was enacted on March 30 and, since then, the short-term message has been delivered pretty convincingly: New York government is serious about doing what it takes to get this state back to work. There's no question that job creation is the focus of and the driving force behind this year's budget.

It's under way in earnest in many ways and many places following a rapid series of post-budget announcements of additional and accelerated investments through the "New York Works" initiative, one of this budget's cornerstones. Over the course of three days during the first week in April, plans were announced for:

- 32 New York Works projects to repair 155 miles of roads and 23 bridges in the Southern Tier, as well as 227 miles of roads and 10 bridges around the Finger Lakes region;
- upgrading and repairing state parks and historic sites throughout the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes, and statewide, as part of an unprecedented effort to enhance New York's parks system; and
- upgrading dams and flood control systems in communities locally and statewide.

New York Works will make a difference across the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions. Same goes for all of upstate. This revitalized effort to rebuild roads and bridges, state parks and local flood control infrastructure, will create jobs and strengthen many communities. The New York Works initiative establishes a stronger state commitment to upstate job creation and economic growth. It will play a key role in turning around the fortunes of upstate New York manufacturing, tourism, agriculture and every other sector of the economy. In short, there's a renewed commitment and a newfound sense of urgency to do what it takes to jump-start this turnaround. And that's because there's finally a widespread belief that until we unlock this state's true economic potential, we will never be able to fully address our other fundamental challenges or priorities.

It also can't be overlooked that this year's budget includes a second round of funding for the economic development blueprints developed last year by New York's 10 Regional Economic Development Councils, including the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes councils. That's important because it means that these ambitious local job creation blueprints remain in play, as they should be. They're the product of a lot of hard work by a region-wide team of business, community and economic development leaders who will continue to help guide our success not just in this state-level competition for economic development resources, but in the global competition for jobs.

Most of the counties in my 53rd Senate District – Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben and Tompkins – fall under the Southern Tier Regional Council. The district's remaining county, Yates, is part of the Finger Lakes Regional Council. The plans for each region can still be found on www.ny works.ny.gov. While these two regional councils bisect the actual Finger Lakes, north and south, I will work to see that projects that benefit the Finger Lakes as a whole will be coordinated between the two councils.

Our work is just beginning. Earlier this year the Senate put forth a plan called "New Jobs-NY" that proposes even more aggressive steps to strengthen the state's economic competitiveness and improve New York's business climate through a broad strategy involving significant tax relief, much of it aimed at private-sector job creation, and fiscal responsibility and spending control across state government – including a 2 percent cap on future state spending growth. Read more about New Jobs-NY on my website, www.omara.ny senate.gov.

So in the aftermath of the adoption of this year's state budget, there's a lot going on. In the words of Unshackle Upstate and others, it's about unlocking New York's true economic potential. It couldn't be timelier and, thankfully, it's a long way from business as usual.

■ Tom O'Mara is a Republican state senator from Big Flats.

COMMENTARY | J. LANTIGUA-WILLIAMS

Economic injustice

Tuesday is Equal Pay Day. This date represents how far into 2012 women must work to earn what men earned in 2011. Because, on average, women get paid 77 cents for every dollar men earn, they have to work more for the same pay.

This disparity goes beyond the issue of gender equality. This is an economic injustice that affects nearly half the workers in this country.

The Department of Labor estimates that women made up 47 percent of the total U.S. labor force in 2010, accounting for up to 66 million workers. Overall, 73 percent of employed women worked full time, while 27 percent worked part time.

We cannot afford to be underpaying almost half the workers when our country is experiencing such challenging economic times. And women are not the only ones affected. Families are affected. Almost 14 million married couples with children relied on two incomes in 2009, representing 60 percent of all married couples with children, according to the National Women's Law Center.

Black and Latina women are affected. African-American women make only 62 cents, and Latinas only 53 cents, for every dollar earned by white, non-Hispanic men, the law center notes. Considering that they represent the two largest ethnic groups in the country, we are continuing the economic segregation that defined much of the last century.

Single mothers and their children are affected. Lower earnings cripple the economic security of the 6,340,000 families headed by working single mothers, 41 percent of whom already live below the federal poverty line.

The ability of women to retire is affected. The Center for American Progress estimates that a typical woman would lose $434,000 over a 40-year period due to the wage gap. Economist Evelyn Murphy, president of The WAGE Project, estimates that the wage gap costs the average American full-time woman worker between $700,000 and $2 million over the course of her lifetime. Lower lifetime earnings mean lower Social Security benefits for women.

This problem must be addressed at a national level, since men earn more than women in every single state. The Paycheck Fairness Act, currently pending in Congress, is essential to combat unfair pay because it would allow victims of sex-based wage discrimination to seek justice.

But we don't have to wait for Congress. Businesses can ensure that they don't discriminate against women workers by performing an Equal Pay Self-Audit provided by the U.S. Department of Labor on its website.

Women are projected to account for 51 percent of the increase in total labor force growth by 2018. We cannot wait until then to rectify this economic injustice.

■ Juleyka Lantigua-Williams writes for the Progressive Media Project.

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THE LEADER
PO BOX 1017
CORNING, NY 14830

E-mail your letter to:
sdupree@the-leader.com

Fax your letter to:
Attn: Stella DuPree
(607) 936-9939

The LEADER

The Leader (ISSN #10501983)
The Leader is published daily at 34 West Pulteney Street, Corning, New York 14830 by Liberty Group Corning Holdings, Inc.
Periodical postage paid at Corning, New York 14830-0817.
USPS code | 0586-160
Postmaster:
Send address changes to The Leader, West Pulteney Street, Corning, New York 14830

ON THE FRONT PAGE
Clocktower by artist Larry Barone

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Fred Benson | 936-4651, Ext. 303

CIRCULATION
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936-4651, Ext. 320

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One month	$28.60	One month	$36.85
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