

# A corner turned? Jobless rate falls

## Experts see local decline as good sign

Wednesday, September 23, 2009 3:04 AM

BY **DAN GEARINO**

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Central Ohio's unemployment rate fell last month for the first time in nearly a year, a sign that the economic downturn might be easing.

The eight-county region had a jobless rate of 8.8 percent, down from 9.3 percent, according to a report issued yesterday by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

"It's continuing to show that the Columbus (metro area) is outperforming the nation as a whole in terms of employment growth, or lack of employment decline," said Bill LaFayette, the Columbus Chamber's vice president for economic analysis.

The national unemployment rate rose in August to 9.7 percent.

The improvement in central Ohio last month, though, reflected the trend seen statewide, where the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 10.8 percent, down from 11.2 percent.

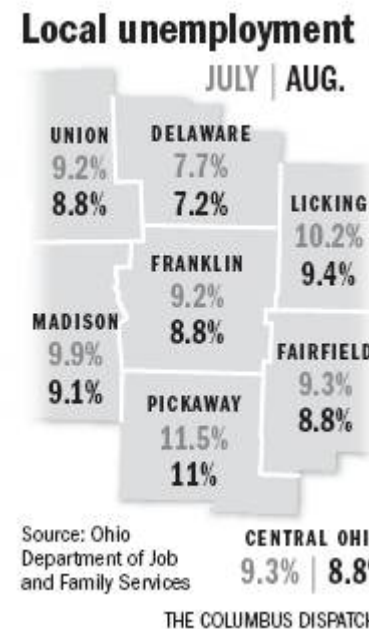
For both the state and region, the decline was based in part on a drop in the size of the labor force, a sign that some people have stopped looking for work. However, LaFayette said, the regional numbers show slightly more evidence that the job climate is improving.

The region's unemployment rate was not adjusted to account for seasonal jobs in the state report. With this adjustment, the central Ohio rate would be 8.7 percent, down from 9.2 percent, based on calculations by LaFayette.

One of the largest local employers, Nationwide Insurance, is being cautious as it adds jobs. The Columbus-based company has about 11,000 employees in the region and 300 open positions.

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"We are carefully managing our headcount," spokeswoman Liz Christopher said.

Whenever possible, the openings are being filled by internal candidates, she said.

Central Ohio covers Delaware, Fairfield, Franklin, Licking, Madison, Morrow, Pickaway and Union counties.

Of those counties, Delaware has the lowest unemployment rate in the region and the state, 7.2 percent, down from 7.7 percent. Franklin County's was 8.8 percent, down from 9.2 percent. Pickaway County's was the highest in the region, 11 percent, down from 11.5 percent. Morrow County's was the second-highest, at 10.2 percent, down from 11.2 percent in July. The county figures are not seasonally adjusted.

The region's civilian labor force was 973,600 last month, down 5,900 from July. The number of unemployed was 85,400, down 5,500.

Looking at specific employment categories, education and health care gained the most, with 700 jobs added, and the financial sector lost the most, dropping by 600 jobs.

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