

Jobless claims increase

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans filing new claims for state unemployment benefits unexpectedly jumped by 14,000 last week to the highest level in nearly six months.

The Labor Department said today new applications for jobless insurance totaled 335,000 during the week ended Dec. 31.

The 14,000 increase in first-time claims also was the largest since the week ended July 16, when they surged by 25,000.

Many analysts had expected claims to be little changed last week from a revised 321,000 a week earlier. The figure for the week ended Dec. 24 originally was estimated to be 322,000.

These analysts noted that the workweek ended Dec. 31 was shortened by the Christmas holiday observance on Monday, which gave newly laid-off workers fewer days to file claims.

Still, most observers believe the labor market remains strong. Many predicted the monthly unemployment rate for December would remain at 5.6 percent, unchanged from November but down from 6.7 percent when the year began. The December rate will be reported on Friday.

The closely watched four-week moving average of weekly jobless claims totaled 326,000, up from 323,250 during the period ended Dec. 24. It was the highest since the average was 327,250 during the four-week period ended Nov. 19.

Teacher test-takers score low

WASHINGTON (AP) — Only 81 of the 289 teachers who took the first-ever national teachers test scored high enough for certification.

But that doesn't mean that the 208 who fell short — 72 percent of the test-takers — are bad teachers, a testing group says.

"Their performance didn't meet the highest standards that are available right now," said Joanne Kogan Krell, spokeswoman for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the private, nonprofit group that created the voluntary test.

"Probably all of them are very, very good teachers," she said "It was meant to be tough, and it was."

After spending about 120 hours each preparing for the test, the teachers demonstrated their teaching skills and knowledge of mathematics, English, social studies, history, science, health and the arts through an exhausting series of exercises that included interviews, essays and videotapes of classroom performance.

Each received Early Adolescence-Generalist certificates, awards the board called "teaching's highest honor." The teachers instruct middle-grade students, ages 11-15, in 23 states.

The goal of the national certification program is

to improve teaching and recognize the best of the nation's teachers.

"The single most important action we can take to improve our schools is to strengthen the ability, knowledge, professionalism and recognition of our teachers," said North Carolina Gov. James Hunt, the board's chairman.

Krell said 252 teachers who took the board's first Early Adolescence-English Language Arts test last year will receive their scores this summer. The board is still developing a scoring system for that exam.

The national test results come after seven years of research and development by the board, founded in 1987 to set nationwide standards for what teachers should know and be able to do. Funding came from corporations, foundations and the federal government.

The teachers paid nothing to take the first tests, Krell said. Once the entire certification system is in place, the board expects to survive on fees paid by applicants, which will be \$975 each.

Those who didn't receive certification this time around can take the assessment again for free.

The board hopes eventually to offer certificates in 33 areas, including Spanish, French, guidance counseling, and physical education.

New clinic-access law blocks protester's threats

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is using a new federal law for the first time to try to keep an anti-abortion protester from threatening a doctor, and a top official said today similar cases will be filed soon.

The department accused an Ohio man Wednesday of threatening an abortion doctor's life, trying to run him off the road and harassing his wife.

The government asked a federal court in Cleveland to order a halt to the alleged threats and harassment by Alan M. Smith of Warren, Ohio, and to make him compensate any victims and pay civil penalties, which could range up to \$10,000 for a first offense.

The civil lawsuit was the first by the Justice Department under the Freedom of Access To Clinic Entrances Act of 1994 law with the goal of protecting a doctor. One earlier civil suit under the act was aimed at ending blockades of a Milwaukee clinic.

"There are a number of cases where I think in the near future we are likely to see use of the civil FACE statute," Associate Attorney General John Schmidt told a news conference today. He said the cases are being investigated by the civil rights division now.

Abortion rights activists, including Eleanor Smeal of the Feminist Majority Foundation, have been demanding that the government enforce the act's provisions against what her group reports is a growing level of threats against abortion providers.

The law allows the department to ask a court to prevent people from blocking health clinics or harming health-care providers and to seek compensation and civil fines.

The lawsuit alleged that Smith made death threats against Dr. Gerald B. Applegate, of Wexford, Pa., who provides reproductive health services in Pittsburgh and Youngstown, Ohio.

The complaint also said Smith and another individual prevented Applegate's wife from entering their Pittsburgh office, where she works as a nurse, for half an hour last June 6.

In June 1994, Ohio officials charged Smith with felonious assault and menacing by stalking. He has been out on bond but has violated a state court bond restriction that he stay in Ohio, the Justice Department alleged.

In November 1994, the department said, Smith threatened Applegate's life during a protest at Applegate's home.

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