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Florida adds jobs, but ... Feb. 12

Below the surface, worker data bleak

It seems that economic "good news" abounds in Florida these days. Unemployment fell to 5.6 percent in December, the state's lowest rate since 2008. According to ADP's latest monthly report, Florida remains the third-best job creator in the nation. The governor's office reports more than 728,000 private-sector jobs have been created since 2010.

Things do appear to be looking up, but are we seeing the entire economic picture?

At first glance, lower unemployment, new jobs and more state revenues would seem to indicate that Florida is on track to significantly boost economic opportunity for our recession-starved businesses, workers, families and communities. It is easy to picture the return to a thriving, strong and secure economy and a bright future to pass on to our children and grandchildren. Yet, according to the States Project, a nonpartisan public-private research venture including Harvard University, Florida ranks a startling 44th in economic opportunity.

Ranking 44th indicates that there is more to Florida's economic "good news" that warrants further inspection.

Looking closer at our economic picture, we should consider what kinds of jobs are being created for Florida's workers. Many research studies indicate that Florida is on a path to become a state known for low-wage, low-skilled workers. A recent report by the Alliance for a Just Society finds that 61 percent of job openings for Florida adults pay less than \$35,318 — the amount needed just to make ends meet. For a family of four with one parent working, 91 percent of the available jobs pay below a living wage.

Moreover, when it comes to the ability of most Florida workers to create their own economic opportunity, they must first overcome the enormous disparity existing between top earners and everyone else. The Economic Analysis and Research Network reports that Florida's wealthiest workers earned an average of \$1.49 million annually while the vast majority of Floridians earned an average of \$34,387 a year. This puts Florida fourth in the nation for income disparity.

Finally, when we think about our economic future, how are we doing with the most critical and sustainable component: meeting the needs and well-being of Florida's children?

Alarmingly deficient, when you look at the latest research-based data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Florida ranks 38th nationally in overall child well-being, based on multiple interdependent measures of economic well-being, education, health, and family/community quality of life. A decade ago, Florida's ranking was 35th nationwide; not only has the state trended near the bottom for years, it has dropped farther.

Florida is now the nation's third-largest state but it ranks 49th in the amount of money it invests in its citizens, the Kaiser Family Foundation reports. The Southern Education Foundation reports that 59 percent of Florida public

school students live in poverty. Florida also has shifted more of the cost of higher education onto college students and their families, reducing state spending by 41 percent per student from 2008 to 2013 — the fifth-largest cut nationwide — even while raising college tuition an average of 67 percent during the same period.

When we put all these pieces together, we get a picture of Florida's economic opportunity that truly needs to be reframed.

Linda Alexionok, president, Voices for Florida, Tallahassee

Publix toppled | Feb. 19

Higher prices are likely the reason

Even though Publix is my favorite grocery store, I am not at all surprised that it has fallen a notch.

When you are "A No. 1 — King of the Hill," there is only one place you can go — down. Truth be told, the prices at Publix are too high. This is especially so with the fresh produce, even on sale.

With more competition on the horizon, Publix is taking a hit — a good thing for us consumers. Let's hope that top executives will regroup and reinvent themselves as a more customer-friendly store with lower prices. While I hate to be a "Trader," I definitely shop where the price is right.

JoAnn Lee Frank, Clearwater

share your opinions

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