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## Stores see surge in applicants for holiday help

NEW YORK (AP) — The odds of landing a part-time job at department store operator Bealls Outlet Stores Inc. this holiday season are slimmer than getting into Harvard: It's one out of every 45.

Don't think the chances are any better at 7-Eleven. One California store received more than 100 applicants in a week and a half for jobs that pay \$8.50 per hour — and the retailer doesn't even usually hire holiday workers.

From department stores and convenience chains to call centers, managers who only a year ago had to scramble to fill holiday jobs are seeing a surge in the number of seasoned applicants — many of them laid off in other sectors and desperate for a way to pay the bills.

The flood of jobseekers comes even as the retail industry drastically cuts back on holiday hiring because of the drop-off in consumer spending, and the applicants — who differ from the usual pool, teens or stay-at-home moms looking for extra spending money — reflect the nation's fast-deteriorating job market.

"I thought it was going to be pretty easy, but I am not the only one looking for a job. There are thousands of us going for the same thing," said Kimberly Caparo of Chesterfield, Mich., who has applied for part-time jobs at Toys "R" Us Inc., Home Depot Inc. and Lowe's Cos. Inc. in recent weeks since she and her husband were laid off by American Axle & Manufacturing Holdings Inc.

At UPS Inc., which is just starting to ramp up its holiday hiring, as much as 30 percent of the seasonal hires in the Northeast are coming from the ranks of the recently laid off, said spokeswoman Ronna Charles Branch. In the past, she said, applicants for holiday jobs at the world's biggest shipping carrier were largely students.

Jean Telfort, a 41-year-old Army veteran, has applied for dozens of part-time jobs, including at Macy's and Nordstrom Inc., with no success. He needs money to help pay the rent and to pay down his \$60,000 credit card bill, which includes his college tuition charges.

"I am looking for anything to carry me over," said the Freeport, N.Y., who returned full-time to Hofstra University where he's pursuing a degree in public relations after he served 11 years in the Army. He expects to graduate in May.

Since the financial meltdown intensified in September, leading to massive layoffs across several industries, a growing number of the unemployed have been turning to lower-paying jobs in the

retail sector, which they thought could help them get by until they found full-time work in their specialized fields or retrain in other areas.

"It would be money coming in even if it's a little bit," said Caparo, 32, who's finishing up a college degree in business administration and does not plan to go back to the battered auto industry. "It's money that I don't have to take out."

But given the shakiness of the retailing industry amid a series of bankruptcies, store closings and liquidations, laid-off workers are even having a hard time finding any jobs. The situation got even tougher Monday, when consumer electronics chain Circuit City Stores Inc. filed for bankruptcy and said it would be laying off more people than previously announced.

John Challenger, chief executive of Chicago-based outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, noted that holiday hiring will fall significantly below last year's total, which was the lowest since 2003. And those with pink slips shouldn't count on new job opportunities even after the holidays, since even more retailers are expected to file for bankruptcy.

The U.S. retail industry alone shed 38,100 jobs in October, bringing the total since January to 297,000, according to Michael P. Niemira, chief economist at the International Council of Shopping Centers. That accounts for 25 percent of the 1.2 million jobs lost in the U.S. so far this year. Yet retail employment only accounted for about 11 percent of total payroll employment — meaning the retail industry is losing a higher proportion of its jobs.

Such retail losses have helped push the nation's unemployment rate to a 14-year high of 6.5 percent in October as another 240,000 jobs overall were cut last month, according to government data released Friday. And many economists believe the unemployment rate will climb to 8 percent or 8.5 percent by the end of next year.

As far back as September, Bealls Outlet Stores — which operates most of its 450 stores in Florida — was being flooded with up to 40 to 50 applicants a week, said Conrad Szymanski, president of the Bradenton, Fla.-based chain. A year ago, they saw one or two applicants a week per store. Each store hires about 10 part-time holiday workers — meaning that about 450 applicants are competing for 10 jobs per store. Those are tougher odds than Harvard, which accepted about 7 percent of all applicants for the class of 2012.

"What we are seeing is a profound increase," particularly in Florida, California, and Arizona, where the real estate market has been hit hard, said Szymanski.

What's so striking, store executives say, is how desperate the applicants are.

Rob Duncan, chief operating officer of Alpine Access, a "virtual" call center provider with 7,500 employees working from their homes across the country, estimated a 10 to 15 percent rise in applicants from a year ago. In the past, they were mostly stay-at-home moms looking for part-time work. Now the company, which handles customer service for stores like J. Crew as well as tech support, debt collection and financial services, is seeing more men and more midlevel managers looking for at least 35 hours of work.

"They are looking for replacement income; instead of supplemental income," Duncan said.

David Ortega, a training store manager at the 7-Eleven in Citrus Heights, Calif., that got more than 100 applications, noted that many applicants have management experience — including those who even owned their own construction business.

The store in a suburb of Sacramento, which has been hard hit by the housing slump, usually saw candidates who came straight out of high school, he said.

Ortega also noted that job candidates are doing more follow-ups. One applicant — a former manager in cosmetics at Macy's — even wrote him a thank you note for discussing the \$8.50 per hour job.

"You expect to see that for a higher-level position, like an executive," he said.