

TO GIVE THE NEWS IMPARTIALLY, WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOR

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January hirings up after a dismal 2025

BY LYDIA DEPILLIS
NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

The U.S. economy put in a strong showing at the start of 2026, following a year of disruptions that depressed both the demand for labor and its supply. Employers added 130,000 jobs in January, the Labor Department reported Wednesday, in a release delayed from last week by a short government shutdown. The unemployment rate fell to 4.3% from 4.4% a month earlier.

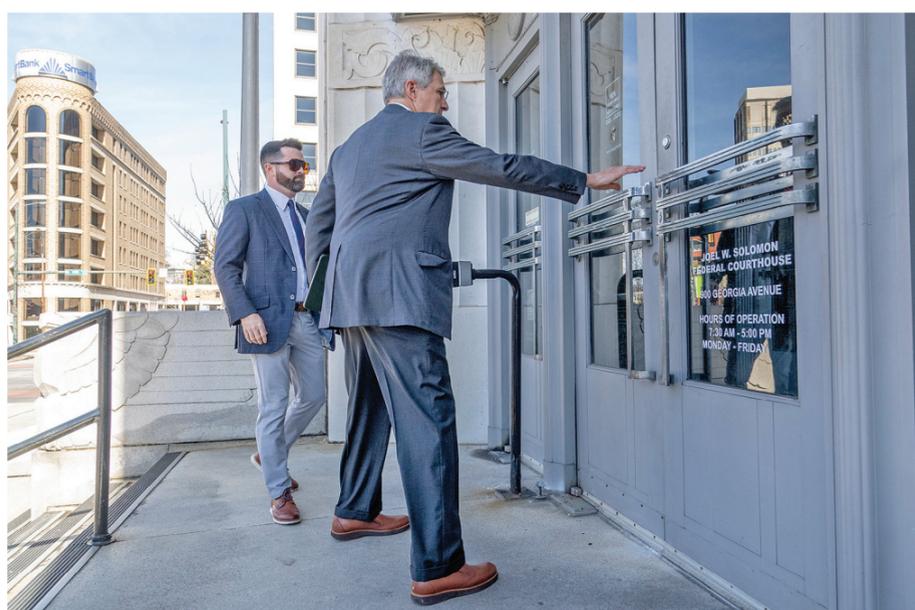
The peppier-than-expected reading is a sign that the labor market might be emerging from a period of extremely slow hiring brought on by a trade war that made companies hesitant to hire, an immigration crackdown that lowered the number of available workers and a federal government firing spree.

Annual revisions to earlier data, which are routine but have been larger than usual in recent years, darkened the picture of 2025. The economy added only 181,000 jobs last year, down from an earlier estimate of 584,000. Not counting the pandemic year of 2020, that is the slowest pace since 2010, the midst of the Great Recession.

"The revised numbers tell a more accurate story of what people were experiencing, which was really, really, really slow job growth and stagnation on a pretty major scale," said Nicole Bachaud, a labor economist with the job search website ZipRecruiter.

For perspective, the economy added nearly as many jobs last month alone as the entire gain during all of 2025. "This is giving a glimpse of what might be a turning point for the market as stabilization is taking place," Bachaud said. "This is

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STAFF PHOTO BY SETH CARPENTER

Jonathan Frost, a former Chattanooga accountant, left, and his lawyer, Lee Davis, walk into the federal courthouse in Chattanooga. Frost pleaded guilty to federal crimes involving money laundering as well as wire and tax fraud.

Frost pleads guilty, free on \$10K bond

BY MASON EDWARDS
STAFF WRITER

Former Chattanooga accountant Jonathan Frost is free on a \$10,000 bond after he pleaded guilty to three federal financial crimes in court Wednesday.

He officially entered the plea in court before Magistrate Judge Christopher H. Steger in the afternoon. Frost, his attorney and a federal prosecutor had signed a plea agreement in January, and it was filed in court late that month.

While the magistrate judge accepted Frost's plea of guilty to conspiracy to commit wire and tax fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering, a federal district judge still needs to accept the plea, Frost's attorney, Lee Davis, said by text.

Chief U.S. District Judge Travis R. McDonough is not required to accept the agreement, and he can impose a sentence more or less severe than anticipated, according to Steger. Federal prosecutor Frank Dale said that the plea

Ex-accountant to be sentenced in August for federal financial crimes

agreement was approved by the Department of Justice.

In the meantime, Frost, 42, surrendered his passport, must provide a DNA sample and report to a probation officer, among other conditions, while he awaits his sentencing, which is scheduled for Aug. 7. Throughout the hearing, Steger reviewed Frost's rights, ensured Frost entered the plea deal voluntarily and discussed rules for sentencing and bond.

After the formal proceedings, Steger offered advice to Frost, something the judge said he does for everyone who pleads guilty before him. While acknowledging he desired to be sensitive to the victims, the judge said Frost's guilty plea was an act of integrity. It's difficult to accept responsibility for one's actions and the consequences

that come afterward, he said.

Frost took a positive first step, Steger said, but the accountant's long-term goal should be to take what was wrong and make it right — which is what the judge defined as justice.

Around 11 of Frost's family and friends filtered into Courtroom 1B. Frost's parents, Steven and Lisa Frost, attended and declined to comment. Before the hearing, an attorney asked those in the gallery whether any were victims. No one answered.

The former accountant initially sat by his parents before moving to sit between his attorneys, Lee Davis and Logan Davis. When a comment was requested after the hearing, the lawyer said he and his client would rely on what was said during court.

There were no dropped charges under the plea bargain, Dale, the federal prosecutor, said in court. After the proceedings, Dale said he could not speak to the

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Officials: Drones led to airport closure

BY EDGAR SANDOVAL,
REYES MATA III,
KAROUN DEMIRJIAN
AND LUKE BROADWATER
NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Officials on Wednesday offered conflicting explanations for a temporary closure of airspace over El Paso, Texas, after the Federal Aviation Administration rescinded an order issued hours earlier to ground flights for 10 days.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy and officials from the White House and the Pentagon said Mexican cartel drones breached U.S. airspace, prompting the temporary closure of airspace over El Paso. But two people briefed by Trump administration officials said the shutdown was prompted by the Defense Department's use of new counter-drone technology and concerns about the risks it could pose to other aircraft in the area.

Initially, the agency cited "special security reasons" late Tuesday night, halting all flights to and from El Paso International Airport for 10 days and isolating a major metropolitan area from air travel. The closure, which appeared to surprise state and local officials, went into effect at 11:30 p.m. local time Tuesday and was lifted a little before 7 a.m. Wednesday.

"There is no threat to commercial aviation," the agency said on social media. "All flights will resume as normal."

Rep. Veronica Escobar, an El Paso Democrat, pushed back on the drone explanation given by Trump administration officials, saying at a news conference it was "not the information that we in Congress have been told."

She added: "There was not a threat, which is why the FAA lifted this restriction so quickly. The information coming from the administration does not add up."

El Paso Mayor Renard Johnson said at a news conference that many local officials remained unclear why the agency took such a drastic action, and that the "failure to communicate is unacceptable." He said it resulted in a series of chaotic events around El Paso, including medical evacuation flights forced to divert to Las Cruces, New Mexico, a city about 45 miles to the northwest.

"This unnecessary decision has caused chaos and confusion in the El Paso community," Johnson said. "I want to be very, very clear that this should've never happened. You cannot restrict air space over a major city without coordinating with the city, the airport, the hospitals, the community leadership."

Here's what else to know: **› Counter-drone program:** In July, Steven Willoughby, deputy director of the counter-drone program at the

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Bondi faces anger from lawmakers over Epstein handling

BY GLENN THRUSH
NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — Attorney General Pam Bondi refused to apologize to survivors of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein who were seated in the House Judiciary Committee room Wednesday — and instead demanded that Democrats apologize to President Donald Trump.

Bondi, imitating Trump's tactic of going on the attack when facing tough questions, offered few detailed answers, no admissions of fault but many expressions of fealty and admiration for a president who has exercised direct control over her department's actions.

The bitter back-and-forth, during a four-hour hearing before lawmakers, demonstrated the extent to which the Epstein files, once relegated to the conspiratorial outskirts of American politics,



ERIC LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Attorney General Pam Bondi testifies during a House Judiciary Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington.

have become a defining issue for Bondi. The topic at times overshadowed her role in subordinating her department into an extension of Trump's will and retribution agenda.

While Bondi fielded questions on an array of controversies — including about the department's unsuccessful effort a day earlier to prosecute six Democrats lawmak-

ers who posted a video that enraged Trump — the focus almost always snapped back to the Epstein scandal.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, the top Democrat on the panel, delivered a salvo of disgust in his opening statement. He started by criticizing Bondi's handling of the release of the investigative files involving Epstein.

"You're siding with the perpetrators, and you're ignoring the victims," said Raskin, of Maryland. "That will be your legacy, unless you act quickly to change course. You're running a massive Epstein cover-up right out of the Department of Justice."

Bondi seemed unmoved. But she had a harder time evading the visuals in the hearing room, embodied by Epstein survivors who sat solemnly behind her in the gallery. She declined to apologize to them and only briefly cast eyes in their direction.

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TODAY	HIGH 56
LOW 37	Partly cloudy

FRIDAY	HIGH 60
LOW 39	Partly cloudy

SATURDAY	HIGH 59
LOW 48	Chance showers

See **B8** for full weather reports