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After recession, Pennsylvania has fared better than U.S. and New Jersey in jobs

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July 08, 2011 | By Jane M. Von Bergen, Inquirer Staff Writer

John "Book" Ksionska is working again - finally, after two years of unemployment.

"I lost almost 15 pounds since I went back to work," Ksionska said gleefully.

That's what happens when an older guy like Ksionska, 55, of Fairless Hills, once a supervisor, goes back on the line in a factory. But Ksionska isn't complaining.

"It's a busy, busy little place," he said of his new employer, Alro Steel in Huntingdon Valley. "We just hired two salespeople. This place has nowhere to go but up."

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Ksionska can count himself part of Pennsylvania's statistical success story, as it fits into the national employment crisis. Throughout the recession, the state has fared better than the nation and better than its neighbor to the east, New Jersey.

In May, when Ksionska started his inadvertent weight-loss program, Pennsylvania's unemployment rate was 7.4 percent, below the U.S. rate of 9.1 percent and New Jersey's 9.4 percent.

The U.S. Labor Department on Friday will release national statistics for June - a particularly significant report because it marks two years since the recession officially ended. June results broken down by state won't be available for several weeks, but it is unlikely that state trends will change significantly.

Why has it been better in Pennsylvania?

It really hasn't been. It has just been less bad, economists say.

Pennsylvania didn't have a big housing boom, so it didn't have as big a collapse when the housing market tanked and pulled the nation into its worst recession in history.

"The housing markets and states and regions in the fastest-growing areas were the ones that got clobbered the most - the Floridas, the Arizonas of the world," said Stephen Mullin, senior vice president at Econsult Corp., an economics firm in Philadelphia.

"Their employment was going through the roof," he said. "Yeah, we got clobbered, but they got clobbered 10 times as much."

When the housing bubble's burst constrained credit and consumer demand, manufacturing tumbled next. Again, Pennsylvania dodged the worst - mostly because its manufacturing sector had already taken its hit in the recession of the early 1980s.

These days, "Pennsylvania is no longer part of the Rust Belt. Pennsylvania has diversified away from that manufacturing belt," said James Diffley, chief regional economist with IHS Global Insight in Eddystone.

"The diversification of Pennsylvania kept it from being another Ohio and Michigan," he said. Michigan's unemployment rate peaked at 14.1 percent.

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