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Statement of

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Nonfarm payroll employment grew by 180,000 to 137.6 million in March. The unemployment rate, at 4.4 percent, was essentially unchanged. Construction employment rose sharply over the month; retail trade and health care also added jobs. Average hourly earnings increased by 6 cents, or 0.3 percent.

Construction employment was up by 56,000 in March, following a decline of similar magnitude in February, when unusually adverse weather conditions contributed to the drop in employment. March job gains were concentrated among nonresidential specialty trade contractors, where an increase of 34,000 more than offset a decline in February. Residential building employment was essentially unchanged over the month and has been trending down since last fall. Although employment of residential specialty trade

contractors edged up in March, the increase did not offset the drop in the previous month. Employment in this industry has been on a downward trend since February 2006.

Retail trade employment rose by 36,000 in March, reflecting employment growth in general merchandise stores. Despite recent gains, employment in general merchandise stores was little changed over the year. Elsewhere in retail trade, employment in building material and garden supply stores declined by 9,000 over the month.

Employment in health care continued to grow in March (+30,000). Job gains occurred throughout the industry, including doctors' offices, hospitals, and nursing and residential care facilities. In the leisure and hospitality sector, employment in food services also continued to trend up (+19,000).

Professional and business services employment was flat in March. Job gains in computer systems design and management consulting were offset by small declines elsewhere in the professional and business services sector.

Manufacturing employment continued to trend down (-16,000) in March, with declines in several industries including furniture, computers and electronic products, textile mills, and paper and paper products. Average weekly hours in the manufacturing sector increased by two-

tenths of an hour; factory overtime was up by one-tenth of an hour.

Average hourly earnings for private production and nonsupervisory workers rose by 6 cents to \$17.22 in March. Over the year, average hourly earnings increased by 4.0 percent.

The number of unemployed persons, 6.7 million, was little changed in March. The unemployment rate, at 4.4 percent, has been in a narrow range of 4.4 to 4.6 percent since last September. In March, the number of persons unemployed less than 5 weeks fell by 273,000 to 2.3 million. Among the major worker groups, the unemployment rate for whites decreased to 3.8 percent over the month; the jobless rates for other groups showed little or no change.

The labor force participation rate held at 66.2 percent and was about unchanged over the year. The proportion of the population that was employed was 63.3 percent in March, little changed over the month but up slightly from a year earlier. Among those not in the labor force, the number of discouraged workers has edged down from March 2006.

In summary, nonfarm payroll employment rose by 180,000 in March, and the unemployment rate was essentially unchanged at 4.4 percent.