

## Unemployed assistant struggles 'to scrape by'

By Sheila McNulty in Houston

Published: March 25 2010 02:00 | Last updated: March 25 2010 02:00

When Leslie Holm lost her job in October, the administrative assistant figured that she would easily find work.

Ms Holm is 46, has years of experience and was willing to try something new. Selling life insurance seemed her best option but every employer she approached insisted on a month of unpaid training.

Ms Holm signed on with one company only to be told she would have to commute 100 miles from her Houston home. She is still unemployed, has no health insurance, lives on \$750 (£499) in government unemployment assistance every two weeks and has few job prospects. "I'm barely able to scrape by, paying for bills and my apartment."

Ms Holm is far from alone. The percentage of US unemployed that have been without a job for 27 weeks or more hit a post second world war peak in January.

Yet Jamie Belinne, assistant dean at the University of Houston Rockwell Career Center, said she was seeing a measured improvement, following the trend of the two other recessions she had studied.

"The drop-off tends to be sudden and extreme but the improvement is slow and gradual," Ms Belinne said.

The Houston career centre has this week opened a new interview facility and 15 of the 18 rooms were booked yesterday. Ms Belinne said: "That, to me, is a great sign. It's kind of like the first shoots of spring coming out of the ground."

That said, there are many people, like Ms Holm, who are still in the thick of the downturn. It has taken a toll on Houston's psyche, in spite of the city having held up better than most.

Stephen Klineberg, a sociology professor at Rice University, conducts an annual survey of Houston.

He found in 2009 that the number of respondents who named the economy as "the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today" shot up to 44 per cent from 15 per cent in 2008, as the official unemployment rate in Harris County, where Houston is situated, grew from 4.1 per cent to 6.3 per cent.

Nevertheless, when asked to compare Houston with other metropolitan areas, 44 per cent said it was a "much better" place to live - up from 25 per cent in 2005 and 31 per cent in 2007.

Ms Holm believes there are more opportunities to retrain and find new in Houston than other cities.

"I was floundering, trying to decide what to do next," Ms Holm says. "Finally my boyfriend said: 'You're good at back massages. You should do that for a living.' " This month she started massage training.

From time to time, she is offered catering work but, whenever she gets some shifts, the government deducts her earnings from her unemployment cheque and then delays the payment. She says it is not worth the trouble. "Why try to work?"

But Ms Holm is only eligible for \$9,000 in handouts. "I'm really scared to get off unemployment."

She cannot afford a dentist, nor a doctor to remove a fibroid tumour from her ovary. And while she knows others have found a way to get free health coverage, she is unsure how to do that. "When you're a middle-class person facing unemployment, you're not familiar with the benefits available to people who have dealt with poverty for a long time."

"I would like to get working again, for the routine, to stop having to juggle the bills," she says.