

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's unemployment rate edged down to 7.5 per cent of the work force in March, marking the fifth straight monthly decline and the longest sustained drop in 14 years, the government said today.

Although the decline was slight — down from 7.6 per cent in February — Labor Department analysts said the steady improvement since October reflected continuing economic recovery from the recession.

Total employment continued climbing in March, rising by another 375,000 to an

all-time high of 86.7 million, the government said. Since reaching a recession-low last March, the number of Americans with jobs has risen by 2.6 million, with adult women accounting for more than half of the increase.

The last time the unemployment rate dropped five consecutive months was between September 1961 and February 1962.

Unemployment declined gradually from the recession peak of 8.9 per cent last May and hovered about 8.6 per cent before beginning a rapid decline last

October. But even with the improvement the jobless rate at 7.5 per cent remains far above its normal post World War II level.

Nevertheless, the Ford administration cited the improvement in the jobless rate and the declining inflation rate as vindication of its cautious economic policy. It also has been a boost to President Ford's election campaign.

Government economists see further improvement in the jobless rate this year, but caution that the decline is not likely to be continuous every month. In advance of the new unemployment

report, Julius Shiskin, commissioner of labor statistics, had said he wouldn't be surprised to see the jobless rate edge up in March.

Shiskin said the normal decline in unemployment during the first year after a recession is about 1.5 per cent. By February, it had already fallen by more than 1 per cent, and he predicted a drop of another one-half to three-quarters of a point during the rest of the year.

Jobless rates among most of the

worker groups in the labor force were relatively unchanged last month with the exception of blacks whose unemployment rate fell 1.2 per cent to 12.5 per cent. Much of the improvement was among adult women, the government said.

Joblessness among blacks is now down nearly 2 percentage points from last September's peak of 14.4 per cent.

The average length of unemployment fell for the second straight month to 15.8 weeks in March, about a week lower than at the peak of the recession last year.

Another bright note was the decline in the number of discouraged workers during the first three months of the year. Discouraged workers are those who want to work but have given up looking for jobs because they believe none are available.

Their numbers, which nearly doubled between the third quarters of 1974 and 1975 to a high of nearly 1.2 million, receded to 940,000 during the first quarter in 1976.