

Evers to direct \$130M in COVID-19 relief funds to workforce development

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Gov. Tony Evers announced \$130 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds will be awarded to workforce development efforts.

But the state's largest business group and GOP legislative leaders said the move fails to address Wisconsin's workforce needs. WMC continued to call on Evers to end enhanced federal unemployment benefits.

During a press conference held in Green Bay, Evers said \$100 million of those funds will go toward a workforce innovation grant program. The state Departments of Workforce Development and Administration, along with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., will select at least 10 local and regional efforts to each receive up to \$10 million in grants.

"It makes sense that what you're experiencing here in Green Bay is different than what's happening in Milwaukee, is different than what's happening in La Crosse," said Missy Hughes, secretary and CEO of WEDC. "These grants might be used to support initiatives like training, planning or developing pilot programs that can be applied in other communities."

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Another \$20 million in ARPA funds will go toward a worker advancement initiative that will be administered by DWD through local workforce development boards. Evers said this program aims to help people who lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic and have yet to re-enter the workforce. The initiative will provide subsidized training opportunities with local employers.

The other \$10 million is for a worker connection program that will provide workforce career coaches to help people find employment. DWD Secretary-designee Amy Pechacek said up to 40 career coaches will be based in the communities they're serving, "so that people can meet them through the local nonprofit organizations that they already know and trust."

Evers said funds will likely be distributed this fall. He said that will give applicants time to create their proposals, while also getting the funds out in a timely manner.

"Folks, Wisconsin is bouncing back. But we can't take our foot off the gas now," Evers said. "And these investments will help get folks back to work, to help our families and our communities and our state recover together."

Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, criticized Evers for vetoing a GOP bill to end the enhanced federal unemployment benefits and instead choosing "a path that spends more money, takes more time, and grows government." They argued there are already programs in place to get people into the workforce.

"We need to remove the clear barriers preventing people from a full return to work before more Wisconsin businesses are lost forever," they said.

Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce called on Evers to instead expand efforts to attract new workers to Wisconsin and invest in STEM education and technical training along with ending the enhanced unemployment benefits.

The extra federal unemployment benefits, \$300 a week on top of the maximum state payment of \$370, are due to end in September.

"Wisconsin's business community appreciates that the governor has acknowledged our state has a workforce shortage," said WMC President and CEO Kurt Bauer in a statement. "But, Gov. Evers must also understand that this disjointed plan will spend a lot of federal funds without solving our short- and long-term challenges."

Meanwhile, the small business-focused Wisconsin Main Street Alliance is applauding the announcement, calling the funds "robust investments to address workforce challenges" in the state.

See more in a release:

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