

Assembly approves GOP bills aiming to increase state's workforce

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The Assembly approved a series of bills Republicans say would help increase the size of the state's workforce by moving more people off of government programs while increasing talent attraction and training efforts.

Republicans are seeking to change requirements to qualify for government assistance programs, fund efforts to attract more veterans to the workforce, and promote apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship programs. But Dems argue the push will only reduce the assistance programs' ability to get more people in the workforce.

One of those bills, which passed in a 59-33 vote along party lines, would require the Department of Workforce Development to conduct random audits for at least 50 percent of all work search actions. Current law requires such audits, but does not specify how many must be conducted. The bill would also change application requirements for those looking to receive unemployment benefits.

Rep. Francesca Hong, D-Madison, slammed Republicans for what she called a move to demean those seeking unemployment benefits. She said Wisconsinites searching for work need assistance, not audits.

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"This is about shaming Wisconsinites who receive benefits," she said. "It's about attacking and preventing disadvantaged, mostly Black and brown folks from adequate benefits altogether."

She added the bill would only punish those who apply for UI benefits while fatiguing the Department of Workforce Development's operations and administration.

Republicans argued AB 938 would work to improve what they called mismanagement of unemployment benefits.

Rep. Warren Petryk, R-Town of Washington, said the bill would increase the ability of DWD to audit unemployment claims to levels seen before Gov. Tony Evers took office.

“This bill will help a legislator get to the bottom of the scope of how much exactly unemployment fraud has occurred under this governor’s watch and what he did or what he did not do to address this important issue,” he said.

The chamber also approved GOP bills that would change eligibility requirements for the Medical Assistance and FoodShare programs.

The Assembly voted 58-34 along party lines to approve AB 935, which would reinstate time limits and implement work requirements for the FoodShare program.

Under the bill, DHS would be required to enforce and implement the program’s employment and training program requirement and drug screening, testing and treatment requirements.

Rep. Beth Meyers, D-Bayfield, said the bill threatens to take food from poor people. Meyers quoted from the Bible and said Republicans should have compassion for those who are struggling.

GOP members criticized Meyers for quoting the Bible. Rep. John Macco, R-Ledgeview, said she had taken the quotes out of context and they did not apply to the Legislature.

Bill author Rep. Mark Born said that more people are on government programs due to the pandemic. The Beaver Dam Republican defended the bill, saying based on Dem reactions, it seemed like they thought the bill ended FoodShare entirely — which isn’t the case.

“All it says is that you have to look for work. Isn’t that the way these programs are supposed to work?” Born said.

AB 934, which passed 59-35 along party lines, would prohibit the Department of Health Services from automatically renewing recipients’ benefits from public assistance programs, including the Medical Assistance. Under the bill, DHS also

would be required to review recipients' eligibility every six months to remove benefits for any recipient that fails to report changes affecting eligibility.

The Assembly passed via voice vote a bill that would require the Office of the Inspector General to "identify and prevent fraud, waste, and abuse" in the FoodShare program, Medical Assistance program and other DHS public assistance programs and submit reports.

Other bills the Assembly approved would punish those on unemployment who "ghost" employers by failing to show up for scheduled job interviews or failing to respond to job offers, among other things.

The Assembly also passed AB 936 in a 59-33 vote. Dem Rep. Don Vruwink joined GOP colleagues in supporting the bill. The bill adds to prohibitions to receive benefits from the Medical Assistance program.

Under the bill, those who knowingly fail to accept job offers or an increase in paid work hours or wages in order to continue receiving Medical Assistance benefits would lose eligibility for benefits.

The Assembly bills now head to the Senate.

The Assembly also approved via party lines 60-34 legislation that would direct Gov. Tony Evers to spend \$20 million in federal ARPA funds to promote and expand the availability of apprenticeship programs.

Rep. Robyn Vining, D-Wauwatosa, said Dems aren't opposed to spending money on expanding apprenticeship programs, but are opposed to spending one-time use money on the effort because it does not guarantee the investments will continue down the road.

Bill author Rep. Loren Oldenburg, R-Viroqua, argued Republicans would continue to fund the effort as the need arises, and skilled trade workers are badly needed as the workforce shortage has shown.

Evers has said all the ARPA dollars have been allocated already, though he has not spent all the available pandemic relief funds.

The Assembly also approved a bill that would reduce to 16 the age of those who can enter into apprenticeship contracts, among other changes to youth apprenticeship

programs. Lawmakers in a 62-30 vote approved AB 973.

Dem Reps. Dora Drake, of Milwaukee; Don Vruwink, of Milton, Deb Andraca, of Whitefish Bay, and Steve Doyle, of Onalaska, joined their Republican colleagues in favor of the bill.