

Sen. Cowles: Audit reviews the We're All In and Wisconsin Tomorrow grant programs

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MADISON, Wis. – Today, the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) released a limited-scope review of the We're All In and Wisconsin Tomorrow grant programs (report 22-21). These programs, which used supplemental federal funding and were intended to assist Wisconsin businesses that experienced economic damages during the public health emergency, were administered by the Department of Revenue (DOR). In February 2022, the Joint Legislative Audit Committee directed LAB to evaluate the State's administration of supplemental federal funding received in response to the public health emergency.

DOR awarded \$595.9 million in We're All In and Wisconsin Tomorrow program grants to small businesses, restaurants, and lodging establishments.

Written eligibility requirements were included in DOR's agreements with the Department of Administration and in additional written requirements that DOR developed. DOR indicated it adjusted the eligibility requirements in order to meet the needs of businesses that had experienced economic damages as a result of the public health emergency. However, LAB found that DOR did not modify its agreements with DOA or modify the written eligibility requirements it developed in order to reflect the adjustments it made to the eligibility requirements.

"As a result of the forced lockdowns, all of our small businesses across our state were affected and it became necessary for us to assist them. Overall, DOR did a fine job administering the \$595.9 million to them and appreciate that they are taking steps to remedy the errors that occurred," said Representative John Macco (R-Ledgeview).

LAB reviewed 172 program grants totaling \$4.1 million and found that DOR did not follow its written eligibility requirements when it awarded 45 grants totaling \$475,000. Because LAB's review is not based on a statically valid sample of grants, it is not appropriate to extrapolate the results of the review to all grants that DOR awarded.

DOR did undertake certain program integrity efforts to identify fraudulent grant applications and recover grants awarded inappropriately. In addition, DOR indicated it was determining the extent to which it may have awarded certain grants in error. LAB made recommendations to DOR related to the efforts to identify grants DOR awarded in error, including that DOR report to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee.

"Thanks to the important work of LAB and their review of these grants, DOR is now undertaking necessary efforts to identify inappropriate and fraudulent activity targeting these grants. I believe that this effort is going to be a very important element to not only ensure the proper administration of the We're All In and Wisconsin Tomorrow Grants, but also to potentially kickstart other state agencies to identify and report fraudulent activity in programs they've administered with federal COVID relief funds," said Senator Robert Cowles (R-Green Bay).

Copies of LAB's report (report 22-21) may be obtained from its website at www.legis.wisconsin.gov/lab or by calling (608) 266-2818. Report concerns related to state government activities to LAB by calling the toll-free hotline at 1-877-FRAUD-17.