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At a recent Committee hearing, members made it clear the UW must enact Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) recommendations regarding the UW and affiliated organizations. Regardless of the audit, the recommendations provide a roadmap to resolving issues found by the auditors.

MADISON - What should we do if the folks in charge don't fix things they know are broken?

At a recent public hearing of the Joint Committee on Audit, on which I serve as ranking minority member, lawmakers publically pondered how to hold government accountable if they repeatedly ignored audit findings.

The audit of the University of Wisconsin System came about from the alleged illegal transfer of public money to a private foundation by former UW-Oshkosh administrators. Two former administrators recently appeared in court on felony charges.

The recently released audit by the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) did not address the court case but provided details on the relationship between UW, its foundations, and other affiliated organizations.

Auditors found an array of problems. For example, a UW-Oshkosh employee placed public money in an affiliated organization and did not return all the money despite being instructed to

by the Chancellor. In other situations, UW employees received full-time UW salaries, but they worked part-time at an affiliated organization. UW foundations did not always reimburse the UW for the public space or staff.

Most disconcerting for lawmakers was the apparent lack of compliance by the UW in correcting recurring problems and a lack of full access to records to complete the audit. As a consequence, auditors could not fully answer lawmakers' questions.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle publically explored what to do to force compliance with audit recommendations.

Over and over again, lawmakers repeated some version of "sending as strong a message as we can" to hold the UW accountable. I explored the possibility of using subpoena powers to require agencies to turn over documents. My colleague, Senator Chris Kapenga (R-Delafield), suggested we take a much stronger approach to compelling agencies to release necessary information and comply with LAB recommendations.

Senator Kapenga proposed the UW and any other noncompliant agency should face strict financial penalties for either withholding information or refusing to comply with audit recommendations. He shared that when companies did not provide information to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) - the federal financial watchdog would assess financial penalties. Senator Kapenga suggested a $50,000 fine for every instance of repetitive noncompliance.



All members of the Joint Audit Committee share Senator Kapenga's frustration with agencies not providing auditors complete and accurate information and agencies not complying with audit recommendations. Too often, audits include recurring findings that should have been resolved when the agency complied with the LAB recommendations.

Our recent hearing dealt, in part, with recurrent computer security issues at the UW. For many years, auditors found problems with IT controls over accounting, payroll and student data.

Without protections, data is vulnerable. The state could suffer losses.

Unresolved, recurring problems that leave the state vulnerable affect many agencies.

Other audits found that the Department of Health Services failed to enact recommendations to address poor compliance with required computer matches to stop inmates from receiving FoodShare benefits. The Department of Employee Trust Funds had repeated findings related to internal financial controls in seven of the prior ten years.

One of the most egregious repeated audit finding was with the state's economic development programs. The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporations (WEDC) did not independently verify whether companies that promised to create jobs with public money actually created those jobs. Further, auditors called into question the job numbers released by WEDC.

These examples of noncompliance, repeated year after year, are only known because of the continual auditing conducted by the LAB.

The steadfast work of auditors to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of state government is critical to the public and to our legislators. Reports provide us reliable information about the action (or inaction) of state government, an assessment of whether or not programs met their purpose and whether money was properly spent. Moreover, the recommendations offered by the LAB provide a roadmap forward in addressing problems.

How seriously agencies take these recommendations falls on lawmakers. The clear message to the UW from the members of the Joint Audit Committee was "get the job done."

The audit recommendations are the means to the end, which is better government. If we are going to be better stewards of the peoples' money, lawmakers must now hold government accountable.