

Nationally Lauded Audit Bureau Turns 50, and Governor Calls for its Demise

Posted on Sep 28, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



This week, Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about the award winning work of Wisconsin's nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau as it completes 50 years of exceptional work serving as "the steward of the people's money."

MADISON - "Fix the broken programs, get rid of the ones that don't work and fund those that are working." There's not a state candidate around that would disagree with this statement.

Yet there are some in the Legislature that would eliminate the very source of information on which programs are a waste of taxpayer dollars and where the broken programs need fixing.

For fifty years, auditors at the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) have assisted legislators and the people of Wisconsin in answering questions about dollars spent. Questions like, "Did we get our money's worth out of that program?"

Skilled public sector auditors perform financial audits on various funds in state government, like the lottery or the Patient's Compensation Fund. They examine federal dollars to assure the state is compliant with federal law in the annual Single Audit. Auditors also review state operations in the LAB review of the Comprehensive Annual Financial Audit released near the end of the year.

The National State Auditors Association recently awarded the highest rating possible to the LAB's financial audit division. Very experienced auditors put the LAB's programs and policies

through a rigorous review. These examinations are conducted every three years. Wisconsin's LAB has consistently received the highest ratings possible.

But financial audits are only half of the award winning work done by the LAB. Program evaluations, answering questions like did this program meet its goals, is the other half of the work of the Audit Bureau.

While the work of the financial division seldom makes headlines, the program evaluation auditors often find their work under the spotlight. Recently a GOP Assembly proposal called for eliminating the LAB. Capitol rumors said elimination was in retaliation for the embarrassing failures made public in three audits over the past three years of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC).

But far from cause for elimination of the nonpartisan watchdog, the program auditors of the Legislative Audit Bureau were rewarded with national recognition for their work on WEDC and similar critically important program audits.

The National Legislative Program Evaluation Society recognized the work of the LAB with its distinguished Certificate of Impact for the 2013 FoodShare audit; the 2014 Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation audit; and the 2015 Supervised Release Placement and Expenditure audit. The recent national accolades should reassure voters and lawmakers of the LAB's stellar work.

Too often lawmakers say they want to know which programs work and which do not, but their actions tell us otherwise. Recent actions such as cutting funding for an outside evaluation for the Drug Court (Treatment Alternative Diversion) program. Or by budget action creating four or five alternative tests for students in publically funded private school programs, making accurate comparisons between public and private school student achievement extremely difficult.

Facts matter. Facts lead us to conclusions that might are may not always be popular politically. That's exactly why we need the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau. If we truly care about creating a well-run state government no one should shy away from the facts nonpartisan auditors present to us – regardless of political implications.

This summer the Beloit Daily News editorialized about the importance of independent agencies in state government. The editorial lauded the LAB saying the agency “has earned a strong reputation for impartiality and independence from partisan political influence.”

Nonpartisan agencies like the Audit Bureau, the Fiscal Bureau and the Government Accountability Board play a key role in a well-functioning state government. The Beloit Daily News warns us:

“TAXPAYERS, TAKE NOTE. Agencies like the GAB, the Audit Bureau and the Fiscal Bureau exist under a mandate to serve truth, not politics. That’s in the best interest of the people, if not the politicians.

“Understandably, the powerful object to any outfit they can’t control. But government watchdogs must not be muzzled and broken to the partisan leash.”

Instead, let us laud the work of our nonpartisan agencies. Join me in congratulating the LAB on excellent accomplishments and national recognition.

And wish the agency another 50 years of exceptional work serving as “the steward of the people’s money.”

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