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# Pandemic aid racial disparities apparent

Black applicants half as likely as whites to receive support

JACOB RESNECK  
Wisconsin Watch

A federal audit has uncovered what researchers into Wisconsin's unemployment insurance system have long suspected: People of color are less likely to receive jobless compensation than their white counterparts.

The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development previously told Wisconsin Watch that it lacked data to know whether its systems might favor some groups over others, such as producing different outcomes around racial lines.

But a June report by the Government Accountability Office — a nonpartisan watchdog that reports to Congress — found that Wisconsin was among the slowest to begin paying federal pandemic unemployment relief, and whites received compensation at twice the rate of black claimants. Native American and Hispanic applicants were also less likely than white claimants to receive help.

Please see AID, Page A3



Yes, you can flip a jetski

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE VILLAGE OF MOUNT PLEASANT

On Saturday and Sunday, watercross returned to Lake Michigan near Racine County's beaches. The return was in part organized by the Mount Pleasant Tourism Commission. 2 Wicked Promotions, the IJSBA (International Jet Sports Boating Association) sanctioned personal watercraft racing organizers out of the Midwest region, hosted Great Lakes Watercross racing and a Freestyle Triple Crown competition. **LOOK:** Scan the QR code for more photos and videos from watercross on Lake Michigan. **NEWSVU**



Rogelio Moreno became a U.S. citizen in May after passing the citizenship test.

'I GOT IT'

# Custodian becomes a citizen

After living in U.S. for 32 years, Moreno achieves his 'top' goal

RYAN PATTERSON  
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RACINE — Rogelio Moreno had a phrase he told himself while studying: I got it.

After 20 months of learning about the U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence and many aspects of American history, that belief paid off. On May 2, Moreno passed the United States citizenship test.

After finding out he passed, he was filled with joy. "I jumped in my seat and said, 'Yeah!'" Moreno said.

Moreno, 61, was born in Mexico and said he came to the U.S. in 1990 in search of "a better life."

Moreno has lived in Racine for almost 20 years and said becoming a

citizen has long been a priority.

"It's nice, because it's my dream," Moreno said. "Citizenship is, for me, the top (goal) in my life."

The road to citizenship started about five years ago.

"It's a long process," Rogelio said. "(I was) nervous every day, nervous, nervous."

Moreno said he hopes to "be an example for all who would like to go forward and become a citizen ... You can reach any dream or goal that you have in your life if you just apply yourself."

In addition to daily studying on his own, Moreno received help from colleagues at St. Catherine's High School, 1200 Park Ave., where he has worked as a custodian for a year.

Custodian Gerald Olley often quizzed Moreno for 15-20 minutes during breaks and occasionally offered tips. For example, one question was who the U.S. president was

during World War I. It was Woodrow Wilson, and Olley suggested Moreno remember that there were two Ws in the question and answer.

Olley said he "was happy to" help Moreno study, and he believed his coworker would pass the test.

Sandy Moreno, who married Rogelio in 2012, also felt confident her husband would succeed.

"I knew he was going to pass," Sandy said. "He was very dedicated." Using audio recordings and flashcards, Moreno went over potential test questions every day. He listened to questions in his headphones while making meals at home and while working at the high school.

Once while at work, the question "What is the Constitution?" was asked in his headphones. Forgetting himself for a moment, Moreno said aloud, "The supreme law of the land."

Please see CITIZEN, Page A3

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# Aid

From A1

The report examined how Wisconsin and four other states — Arizona, Louisiana, New York and North Dakota — implemented Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). Congress created the program in 2020 to aid self-employed and part-time workers who lost work but wouldn't otherwise qualify for regular compensation. It has paid out at least \$131 billion nationwide.

The Wisconsin data covered January 2020 through April 2021, when the state's unemployment insurance system buckled under a pandemic stress test, leaving many jobless residents to miss bill payments, rack up credit card debt, and face eviction — and even homelessness.

The COVID-19 pandemic struck after Wisconsin's Republican-led Legislature spent years toughening rules for accessing unemployment benefits — in the name of reducing fraud — and leaders in both parties failed to upgrade antiquated computer systems that cannot answer phones and print compensation checks at the same time.

It took Wisconsin two months to begin distributing PUA following Congressional approval. DWD reported making its first payments on May 21, 2020, but paid fewer than 1,000 claimants by the month's end, according to the GAO.

Only North Dakota (34.8%) granted a lower percentage of overall claims compared with Wisconsin (38.1%). The two states also saw the most severe racial disparities in payouts, the audit found.

In Wisconsin, 43.3% of white claimants received PUA payments, compared to 21.9% of black claimants, 24.8% of Hispanic claimants, 27.2% of Native American claimants and 41.8% of Asian claimants.

The figures add to a lengthy list of racial disparities in Wisconsin, which has some of the country's starkest inequities in education, public health, housing, criminal justice and income.

People should receive unemployment benefits based on need and not "because of the color of their skin," U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh told Wisconsin Watch. "We have to be equal across the board."



Walsh

He says the Labor Department welcomes the audit and is looking into its recommendations.

"One of the things that we're doing, quite honestly, is acknowledging and identifying the challenges that we see in the system," Walsh added.

One of those recommendations is for President Joe Biden's administration to study what happened in the early months of the pandemic to help states avoid future difficulties.

The Labor Department agreed with a GAO recommendation to advise Congress on future options to help unemployed freelancers and other contingent workers. It partially agreed with the audit's call to examine the reasons for racial disparities in pandemic aid, but expressed concern that doing so would distract from other efforts to improve equity.

DWD officials told auditors that they could not explain Wisconsin's racial inequities in disbursing federal pandemic relief.

"Officials stated that their IT system does not capture the reason for denial of claims, and that they would need to examine each PUA application manually," the report said.

But the GAO identified language barriers in Wisconsin and other states for claimants who don't speak English. The PUA online application was only available in English, forcing those needing translation help to phone call centers that were overwhelmed early in the pandemic.

## New 'navigator'

Late last week, DWD announced a \$3 million "UI Navigator" partnership with United Migrant Opportunity Services to boost aid access to migrant and seasonal farmworkers workers, non-English speakers and other workers who face persistent poverty and inequality. The federal Labor Department is funding the partnership, along with similar new programs in six other states.

"The Department of Workforce Development strives to make Wisconsin a fair and just place for all people to live and work. This includes eliminating racial and ethnic disparities while advancing equity and economic opportunity through workforce development," Jennifer Sereno, a DWD spokesperson, said in a statement that called PUA "a new federal program with entirely distinct eligibility criteria."

Sereno added: "Disparate access to information, technology, documentation, and challenges with validating applicant information can affect the implementation and outcomes of support programs."

Critics of Wisconsin's approach to unemployment insurance have warned of such barriers for years.

Madison attorney Victor Forberger has represented dozens of jobless clients struggling to receive unemployment aid — even before the pandemic. He said Wisconsin's complex claims filing process might explain some inequities.

"The claim filing process in Wisconsin is incredibly difficult," he told Wisconsin Watch. "It's set up as a bunch of hoops and obstacles that people have to jump through."

DWD in late 2020 announced a plan to simplify application language, which Forberger says falls short. And it recently updated its

online claimant portal that allows people to submit documents online instead of mailing or faxing them.

The agency says it also aims to ease filing for people without internet access. DWD has also taken initial steps to update its 1970s-era IT system, but doing so is expected to take years and cost about \$90 million.

Forberger said the federal government requires state unemployment systems to avoid discriminating against people with disabilities, people of color and those who don't speak English.

"And the feds need to start enforcing those requirements, and they've not been enforcing those requirements nearly to the extent that they need to," he said.

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# Citizen

From A1

A nearby teacher heard him talking and said, "What?"

"Oh sorry, I'm studying," Rogelio replied with a laugh.

The day he passed the test, Rogelio and Sandy had a nice dinner to celebrate, and the high school had a small party in May.

Rogelio said the school has embraced him, saying it feels like a family atmosphere. Olley called Rogelio an excellent, hard-working colleague.

"We're glad to have him," Olley said.

Sandy is glad to have him as well. She grew up in Racine and works as a lunch lady at St. Catherine's. She and Rogelio met when he had a job remodeling her home. Sandy is fluent in Spanish and oc-

asionally translated for Rogelio during an interview.

Rogelio lived in California and Texas before moving to Racine in 2004. He said it was a big adjustment moving to the Midwest from much warmer climates.

Sandy helped show him winter activities like sledding and building a snowman.

In mid-May, Rogelio received the official citizenship paperwork. His passport arrived last week. Receiving both of those were massive reliefs.

"If you're a citizen, it's more security," Rogelio said. "I love the United States. It's opportunity."

Leading up to the test, there was nervous anticipation, but Rogelio felt prepared because of all his studying. After passing the test, his motto came true: I got it.

Sandy Moreno hugs her husband, Rogelio, as they celebrate his becoming a U.S. citizen.

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