

# The Detroit News

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Dec. 31, 2021

Reporter Beth LeBlanc helped shine a spotlight on problems with fraud and eligibility criteria in Michigan's COVID-19 pandemic unemployment insurance claims. LeBlanc provided a huge public service for hundreds of thousands of claimants who were forced to reconfirm their eligibility for federal benefits that they already had been paid and federal taxpayers who were ripped off by lax state security measures.

LeBlanc broke the story in July 2021 about how more than 648,000 Michigan unemployment recipients had to file additional paperwork and might have to repay benefits because of unapproved qualification criteria developed by the Michigan Unemployment Insurance Agency.

The Michigan Unemployment Insurance Agency mailed letters in late June to claimants who had marked one of four reasons provided by the state to indicate they were eligible for federal pandemic unemployment assistance, a form of jobless aid made available to part-time, self-employed or gig workers who wouldn't normally qualify for benefits. The U.S. Department of Labor said the four qualifications listed by the state when it began distributing Pandemic Unemployment Assistance benefits did not comply with federal guidelines. This forced the state to re-evaluate PUA eligibility for all individuals who selected Michigan's non-qualifying reasons.

The state's failure opened the door for it to seek repayment from some of the hundreds of thousands of already paid-up claimants, causing huge frustration among already financially strapped workers. State of Michigan officials have since claimed they would seek a waiver for repayment from the federal government for the affected recipients, but some Michigan residents say to this day the state is still seeking repayment.

To make matters worse, LeBlanc reported in August that leaders within the Michigan Unemployment Insurance Agency were told as early as Jan. 6, 2021, that the federal government rejected four state-developed unemployment qualifications for aid. The state agency told federal officials then that it was making the necessary changes to the qualifications for federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, but it didn't notify the nearly 600,000 people affected by the mistake for nearly six months.

That wasn't all. Besides the problems with bungling the eligibility criteria, UIA officials opened the door for massive amounts of unemployment fraud. LeBlanc highlighted the gaping holes in the state's unemployment security later in July when she reported that no UIA workers or officials questioned whether Kimberly Kardashian and Kylie Jenner were actual Michigan residents before they received thousands of dollars in Michigan unemployment benefits in May 2020. The payments to claimants filing under the reality stars' names were processed before the state's software investigators could flag them as suspicious, a failing in the early days of the pandemic that was "much more than an aberration," according to Unemployment Insurance Agency emails obtained by LeBlanc.

Beth LeBlanc's thorough investigative work was followed by state legislative hearings and a grilling of state UIA leaders. The issue continues to reverberate to this day. Her work is the epitome of public service.

Sincerely,

