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# Carmichael Times

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FEBRUARY 5, 2021

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## Really Digging the Dirt



Former pastor hits the pasture. Retired American River Community Church Minister Rich Reimer's new calling is contracting.

**Story and Photos by Susan Maxwell Skinner**

**CARMICHAEL, CA (MPG)** - Retirement can lay as heavily on the hands of clergy as laymen. When American River Community Church Pastor Rich Reimer hung up his cassock last year, he thought he and his wife would jump in a camper and see America. Instead, he's jumped on a tractor and is seeing land from the soil up.

"God gave me two skills," considers the 66-year-old. "One was for the Church. The other is working with my hands." During 39 years of ministering, the Pastor was also handyman for his flock. "Running a church is like having another house," he considers. "I've always been involved in maintenance. Even when I had volunteers, I worked with them. I must have put on 10 roofs. I've mended leaks, installed irrigation and sound systems. I was usually the only man on campus so, when toilets ran over, I

was the man they called." If pounding nails seems incongruous with preaching, Reimer is quick to note that Jesus was a carpenter. "Another thing I enjoyed was driving the tractor we borrowed for harvest festival hayrides," he says. "When I retired, my wife Cindy gave me her blessing to get my own tractor. Some wives will do anything to get a husband out of the house."

His shiny red vehicle is a 32-hp Mahindra, with front-end loader. Driver and beast have tackled stump removal, graded parking lots, levelled lawns and dug post holes. "Two words that describe my life's mission are loving service," enthuses the contractor. "I pride myself on serving the church. Now my service is hands-on."

"I'd always wanted to occupy myself meaningfully after retiring. My son Jonathan saw this tractor advertised at a good price last year. Its attachments included a rotor tiller, a scraper and a back hoe. I thought yeah, I could do good work with all

that. We drove to Redding to look at it. It was like brand-new, with only 100 hours on the meter. The 84-year-old owner was a Christian. His wife had recently died and his own health was declining. When we closed the deal, he led us in prayer for my future business. Less than two months later, he died of COVID. I felt sad but privileged - his prayer seemed like a confirmation of what God would have me do."

Prayers aside, operating licenses are ordained by a Sheriff's background check. "There's no dispensation for being a pastor," Reimer laughs. "You may live by the Ten Commandments but the County has its own rules. I got my licenses and went to work. My first job was mowing three acres of pasture in Newcastle. It felt great to be outdoors under a clear blue sky. I'd given a final sermon called "Stepping into a New Day." I felt I'd taken my first step.

"I don't want to be busy every day."  
*Continued on page 3*

## Society for the Blind Breaking Barriers

By Kristin Thébaud, Thébaud Comm.

**SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG)** - Society for the Blind in Sacramento and Blind Institute of Technology™ (BIT) in Colorado are joining forces to create a new pathway for employment of people living with blindness or visual impairment. Both organizations are driven by the ultimate goal of full independence for people who are blind and visually impaired (BVI), which makes this a natural pairing.

BIT's sole focus is employing BVI professionals in corporate America, placing them in positions on par with their education and skill level, through networking, education and workforce development. Society for the Blind is taking on the challenge of employment with its primary focus placed on providing people who are blind or visually impaired with the tools they need to attain employment and independence. The two forward-thinking organizations will pull their resources together to achieve the goal of significantly decreasing not only unemployment, but the underemployment epidemic that plagues professionals who are blind or visually impaired.

"For far too long, blindness organizations across the country have approached the unemployment epidemic amongst the blind and visually impaired in a siloed fashion, which has done nothing as evidenced by the same unemployment rate as 30 years ago when the ADA was passed. It is time to end the epidemic and put BVI professionals where they belong, in mainstream corporate America. I am super excited to be collaborating with a progressive leader like Society for the Blind and look forward to the impact we will make together," said Mike Hess, BIT executive director.

"It is so important for blindness organizations like Society for the Blind to be creative and really make a difference in the employment opportunities for people living with low vision and blindness. I believe that collaborations allow us all to do more and be more effective, and that is why I am thrilled to be partnering with BIT. Working together, I believe we can truly move the needle on the rate of employment in a positive direction," said Shari Roeseler, executive director, Society for the Blind.

To learn more about the two organizations, visit their websites at [www.blindinstituteoftechnology.org](http://www.blindinstituteoftechnology.org) and [www.societyfortheblind.org](http://www.societyfortheblind.org). ★

## Proposition 19 Puts Family Legacies at Risk

**Commentary by Ted Gaines**

**SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG)** - A massive change to property tax law is coming soon that could cost families thousands of dollars a year and affect how parents and grandparents pass down properties through generations.

Proposition 19, passed by California voters last November, makes major adjustments to the "parent-child" and "grandparent-grandchild" exclusions, all to the harm of taxpayers. Prior to Prop. 19, parents and grandparents could transfer their principal residence to a child or grandchild with no value limit and without adjusting the property tax base-year value, meaning



Prior to Prop. 19, parents and grandparents could transfer their principal residence to a child or grandchild with no value limit and without adjusting the property tax base-year value, meaning that the child or grandchild would not be saddled with a huge new property tax assessment when they became owner. Image by Tumisu from Pixabay

that the child or grandchild would not be saddled with a huge new property tax assessment when they became owner. The person receiving the property could live there, rent it out, use it as a second home, or

let it sit empty - there were no restrictions on property use to qualify for the exemption.

Prop. 19 changes all of that. Once the new law goes into effect on February 16, 2021, the unlimited

value provision disappears. The new formula will be the current taxable value of the property plus one-million dollars. This change will hit many coastal property owners  
*Continued on page 3*

# New Law Extends COVID Tax Credit for Employers who Keep Workers on Payroll

By David A. Tucker, Internal Revenue Service

WASHINGTON, D.C. (MPG) - The Internal Revenue Service urges employers to take advantage of the newly-extended employee retention credit, designed to make it easier for businesses that, despite challenges posed by COVID-19, choose to keep their employees on the payroll.

The Taxpayer Certainty and Disaster Tax Relief Act of 2020, enacted Dec. 27, 2020, made a number of changes to the employee retention tax credits previously made available under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), including modifying and extending the Employee Retention Credit (ERC), for six months through June 30, 2021. Several of the changes apply only to 2021, while others apply to both 2020 and 2021.

As a result of the new legislation, eligible employers can now claim a refundable tax credit against the employer share of Social Security tax equal to 70% of the qualified wages they pay to employees after Dec. 31, 2020, through June 30, 2021. Qualified wages are limited to \$10,000 per employee per calendar quarter in 2021. Thus, the maximum ERC amount available is \$7,000 per employee per calendar quarter, for a total of \$14,000 in 2021.

Employers can access the ERC for the 1st and 2nd quarters of 2021 prior to filing their employment tax returns by reducing employment tax deposits. Small employers (i.e., employers with an average of 500 or fewer full-time employees in 2019) may request advance payment of the credit (subject to certain limits) on Form 7200, Advance of Employer Credits Due to Covid-19, after reducing deposits. In 2021, advances are not available for employers larger than this.

Effective Jan. 1, 2021, employers are eligible if they operate a trade or business during Jan. 1, 2021, through June 30, 2021, and experience either: A full or partial suspension of the operation of their trade or business during this period because of governmental orders limiting commerce, travel or group meetings due to COVID-19, or A decline in gross receipts in a calendar quarter in 2021 where the gross receipts of that calendar quarter are less than 80% of the gross receipts in the same calendar quarter in 2019 (to be eligible based on a decline in gross receipts in 2020 the gross receipts were required to be less than 50%).

Employers that did not exist in 2019 can use the corresponding quarter in 2020 to measure the decline in their gross receipts. In addition, for the first and second calendar quarters in 2021, employers may elect in a manner provided in future IRS guidance to

measure the decline in their gross receipts using the immediately preceding calendar quarter (i.e., the fourth calendar quarter of 2020 and first calendar quarter of 2021, respectively) compared to the same calendar quarter in 2019. In addition, effective Jan. 1, 2021, the definition of qualified wages was changed to provide: For an employer that averaged more than 500 full-time employees in 2019, qualified wages are generally those wages paid to employees that are not providing services because operations were fully or partially suspended or due to the decline in gross receipts. For an employer that averaged 500 or fewer full-time employees in 2019, qualified wages are generally those wages paid to all employees during a period that operations were fully or partially suspended or during the quarter that the employer had a decline in gross receipts regardless of whether the employees are providing services.

Retroactive to the Mar. 27, 2020, enactment of the CARES Act, the law now allows employers who received Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans to claim the ERC for qualified wages that are not treated as payroll costs in obtaining forgiveness of the PPP loan. For more information, see COVID-19-Related Employee Retention Credits: How to Claim the Employee Retention Credit FAQs.

# Senate Republicans Lead Bipartisan Call for Oversight Hearing in Response to Scathing EDD Audit Results

By Jacqui Nguyen, California Senate Republicans

SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG) - The non-partisan State Auditor released the results of an audit about the Employment Development Department (EDD) originally called for by members of the Senate Republican Caucus last summer. The audit results come after news reports show an increase in the number of backlogged claims and that rampant fraudulent unemployment claims are now at a staggering \$11 billion and could rise as high as \$30 billion.

The audit found that "the economic downturn worsened EDD's already poor performance" and that, even after adding numerous staff, EDD "only marginally improved the percentage of answered calls." Last year, Senate Republicans asked for call center metrics to be included in the

budget as a way to improve accountability, but the budget approved by the Governor and Democratic leadership did not include that proposal. The audit also found that, due to the inefficiencies and poor management at the EDD, some Californians will have to pay back benefits.

In response to the audit, Senate Republican Leader Shannon Grove (R-Bakersfield) and a bipartisan group of senators delivered a letter to the Chair of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee (JLAC) and the Chair of Senate Budget Subcommittee #5 requesting an immediate oversight hearing. The oversight hearing should focus on EDD implementing the Auditor's recommendations to address the backlog of claims and prevent future fraud. To download the bipartisan letter go to: [cssrc.us/sites/default/files/210126\\_EDD-Hearing-Request.pdf](https://cssrc.us/sites/default/files/210126_EDD-Hearing-Request.pdf)

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# Proposition 19 Puts Family Legacies at Risk



Senator Ted Gaines

*Continued from page 1*  
in the pocketbook as they inherit or receive property that appreciated wildly in California's multi-decade housing boom. Modest homes in Silicon Valley neighborhoods owned and transferred by middle-class families will face stratospheric tax bills under the new regime.

As bad as that will be, it is another provision that is more likely to cause havoc and financial loss for many Californians. Under Prop. 19, a person receiving property under one of these exclusions must now use the property as their primary residence to qualify. That means if you have moved to a different city, you would have to move back and occupy the home to receive the exemption. It means that if you are happy with your current home, you would have to give it up and move to qualify for the exemption.

The date these changes go into effect is right

around the corner. If you are planning on transferring property to a child or grandchild, please be aware of the very different landscape that awaits you and them after February 16.

There are a thousand unanswered questions regarding these changes that are not clarified in the proposition language. What happens if multiple children receive a property but only one makes it a primary residence, for example? What happens if someone qualifies for the exclusion, then moves out of the primary residence for a time, then moves back in? Does the exemption kick back in or is it lost forever? It was an initiative written with little concern for detail.

Proposition 19 does provide some new and welcome benefits for California taxpayers, most notably that it allows certain property owners to transfer their base-year tax assessment to all 58 counties. This allows homeowners who want to downsize, move closer to their children, or relocate for any other reason to keep a lower property tax. Prior to Prop. 19, that benefit was only available within counties or in a handful of counties that accepted base-year transfers. Taxpayers can now also use that transfer provision three times instead of the one-time,

geographically limited use in prior law.

Although I favor the base-year transfer provisions, I oppose this new tax increase, which will take hundreds of millions of dollars a year from Californians inheriting their family's biggest asset. But it's now the law, and as a Board of Equalization Member and taxpayer advocate, I will be seeking to identify every area where Prop. 19 is unclear and am committed to working with the legislature, county assessors, tax professionals and taxpayers to ensure effective administration of this new law.

Visit my website at [boe.ca.gov/gaines](http://boe.ca.gov/gaines) for more information on Prop. 19 and for examples of how the new law would affect passed-down properties. Please consult a qualified attorney or tax professional for advice on transferring any property.

*Senator Ted Gaines was elected to represent the Board of Equalization's First District. He is a leading taxpayer advocate and is committed to providing trustworthy and transparent representation for nearly ten million constituents in 30 counties of northern, eastern, and southern California. For more information, visit [boe.ca.gov/Gaines](http://boe.ca.gov/Gaines).* ★

# Really Digging the Dirt



Pastor Rich in his better-known role: officiating during his daughter Adele and Todd Palin's wedding.

*Continued from page 1*

It's a part-time job – my wife and I watch grandkids two days a week – the important thing is to do a good job. I don't mention being a pastor to my clients – unless the subject arises – but before every job, I pray for safety. Tractors can be dangerous. Once I uprooted a big stump: it fell from the bucket and left a crack in the tractor hood. It might have cracked my head. I sure said a prayer after that." His days of donning jacket for weekdays and preaching robes Sunday are done. "It feels different heading out in jeans, a work shirt and steel-toed boots," he says.

"But for any profession, you dress the part."

Gone also, is the collection plate. Tractor For Hire rates are competitive with other operators. Pastor and tractor nevertheless pitch in gratis for the church where he ministered for almost a quarter of a century. "There's always something to be done in our community garden," he explains. "Donating and volunteering are part of being a Church member. "It's fulfilling that God gave me gifts to use in the community and for the church."

To contact Reimer's Tractor For Hire Call or text 916 502 7928. ★

# Waste Management Fees Increase

*By Laurie Slothower, Sacramento County*

**SACRAMENTO COUNTY, CA (MPG)** - The Sacramento County Board of Supervisors has unanimously approved a rate increase that will increase the cost of residential garbage, recycling and green waste services effective March 1, 2021, in the unincorporated area of Sacramento County.

The increase - the first in 10 years - was less than staff's recommendation and will partially offset the increased costs of collecting and processing recycling and green waste materials. The increase falls short of the amount required to prepare the county to fully implement a state law that requires weekly residential collection of food waste

with green waste effective January 2022.

Under Tuesday's action, rates will increase \$5 a month for 30-, 60-, and 90-gallon garbage carts. An additional increase of \$5 a month will go into effect Jan. 1, 2022.

The Board also approved doubling the subsidy for customers who qualify for the low-income solid waste lifeline rebate program. Effective March 1, the rebate amount will be increased from \$5 per month to \$10 per month.

While previously a source of revenue, changes in the recycling marketplace in the past few years have made collecting and processing recyclables a significant expense. Additionally, a new state regulation (SB 1383) mandates diverting organic

waste (such as food scraps and soiled paper) from landfills to reduce greenhouse gases.

When the regulation goes into effect in January 2022, the county would need to pick up green waste weekly instead of every other week and residents would be required to place food scraps and other recoverable organic waste into their green waste carts. County supervisors expressed a desire to seek a delay in the implementation of SB 1383 or to find alternative financing for equipment and infrastructure costs associated with compliance.

The Department of Waste Management and Recycling serves about 160,000 customers in the unincorporated area of Sacramento County. ★

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# Rich Desmond Update: The Storms Have Hit the Region - Be Ready



**From the Office of Supervisor Rich Desmond**

Dear Friends,

With the extreme winter weather we are facing, please be assured the Sacramento County Department of Transportation (SACDOT) is prepared to provide a quick response to flooded roadways and broken traffic signals.

When winter weather hits, crews will respond twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to clear roadways, remove fallen trees, repair streetlights, fix traffic signal malfunctions and keep traffic moving safely. Flooded roads are monitored and closed when necessary. When roads are flooded, they are posted to allow you to check routes for problem areas.

While crews are in the field every day, your assistance - especially during bad weather conditions - is important. Report roadway issues by calling 311 (or 875-4311) or reporting online at the 311 website. You can also report with a

311 app on your phone.

**Fallen Trees and Branches:** During severe weather conditions, crews may clear just the material in the roadway and move on to the next incident. Additional cleanup work is performed when crews have handled all incidents that require immediate attention. (Note trees or branches that fall on private roads or property are the responsibility of the property owner so please contact a private tree service for fallen trees or branches on your property)

**Flooded Roads:** Crews respond immediately to flooded roads and attempt to clear what is causing the problem right away. If the flooded road cannot be cleared, signage will be placed to close the road and maintenance crews will work to continue to clear the roadway.

**Plugged Culverts** (a tunnel carrying a stream or open drain under a road or railroad): If a culvert is plugged, SACDOT crews will flush the culvert until it's clear.

**Traffic Signal Out:** Technicians are dispatched immediately to make repairs to traffic signals that are out or malfunctioning.

**Downed Street Signs and Stop Signs:** Street signs will be replaced as soon as possible. Downed stop signs are a priority and SACDOT's goal is to have them back up within

two hours of notification.

**Street Light Out:** When reporting a problem, have the pole number or property address available. The pole number can be found on a sticker approximately 8 feet high, usually on the traffic side of the pole.

**Plugged Storm Drains** (a major cause for localized street flooding): Call 311, give the location and the Department of Water Resources will dispatch crews to remove leaves and/or other debris from the drain.

**Sandbag Sites:** If your property has a history of flooding, get sandbags in advance at Sacramento County's sandbag self-serve sites. Locations can be found online at the Department of Water Resources website.

If you encounter a downed power line, electrical sparking, or any other emergency that is a danger to yourself or others please immediately call 911. For any other power outages please report them to SMUD at 1-888-456-7683 or on SMUD's website. For any PG&E outages contact 1-800-743-5000 or report them on PG&E's website.

As always, if you have any further questions or concerns you may contact me at richdesmond@saccounty.net or (916) 874-5471.

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EQUAL HOUSING OPPORTUNITY



By Noah Howard

I used to write reviews constantly, for every game I played, for every movie I watched. It's a hobby I kept up through college writing for the Arts section of the Stanford Daily, and one I always enjoyed for the sheer joy of the practice. But recently I started rereading what I had written, a practice I had largely avoided because I always nitpick my own work, and found a remarkable record of my own memories. By reading my own reviews I was able to relive the beautiful experiences I had with games that now only exist as a blip in my mind. Now only occasionally writing reviews from quarantine, I started employing a more direct method of recording experiences that I did not want to forget: directly uploading gameplay footage from my PlayStation console to YouTube.

Unlike the many aspiring video game streamers and influencers on the internet, I leave my videos as "unlisted": I can share the links with friends and family, but other than that only I have

# Game Plots

## A Video-Gameplay Diary

access to the footage I upload. When I scroll through my list of videos it feels almost like a diary of experiences that I want to remember, forever preserved outside the limited confines of my own brain.

But recording my own gameplay has been a strange, surreal experience. For one, it's bizarre to see some element of "you" played on a "non-you" character. When I rewatch my boss fight against a fire demon in Demon's Souls, I see some part of myself reflected on a character that looks nothing like me. When my on-screen avatar barely rolls out of the way of a fiery punch at the last second I flinch, knowing that at that moment a past version of myself was sighing with relief. I always feel a similar surrealism when looking at old pictures or videos of myself, but through the lens of video games the emotion behind the camera is implied rather than explicit. It's a strange form of connection, of empathy with an unseen version of "me", that is hard for me to pin down.

It's also been surreal to look at exactly what I record, or rather, what I don't. Games that I sunk

dozens of hours into have only a few 15-minute clips uploaded. I can't take this as anything but a strange hint: that out of many hours of joy I gained from the game, only those few minutes were worth preserving and hanging on to. This is a problem I've struggled with for years of enjoying my favorite hobby. Is it all worth it for only a few minutes of pure joy and exhilaration? How much does the experience of playing a game "count" if I don't remember it? And will I one day regret sinking so many hours of my life into a medium where most hours are enjoyable but forgettable?

Watching my videos assuages my fear. Like a hiker who climbs a mountain for a few short minutes of that perfect view, these videos preserve the rich tapestry of emotions that video games give me, however far between. This is a medium that can communicate experiences no other art can, that has the ability to, for a few short moments, let you leave your body and live another life. When I rewatch my videos, I'm reminded of that transcendence, a feeling that I constantly chase and that is always worth it. ★

# GOBIZ Director Releases Joint Statement with California Labor Secretary

By Kaitlin Lewis,  
Governor's Office of Business & Economic Development

**SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG)** - Following the California Employment Development Department's (EDD) release of the state's employment data from December the Director of the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz), Dee Dee Myers issued the following joint statement with California's Labor Secretary, Julie A. Su: "Nearly a year ago, California was experiencing record-long job growth and record-low unemployment. The numbers we see today

reflect the challenges we've faced and the work that needs to be done – as a state, as a country, and as individuals. Throughout this pandemic, Californians have stepped up; whether it be small businesses protecting their employees and customers, manufacturing companies pivoting to make PPE, essential workers continuing their critical activities to keep us all healthy, fed, and safe, or neighbors checking on neighbors. It's crucial that we do everything we can to ensure that Californians can get back to work safely. By doing what we can to step up and protect one another, we can and will rebuild our economy, our state, and our nation." ★

# SSHH & HART Announces Local Respite Centers Are Now Open

By Traci Rockefeller Cusack,  
T-Rock Communications

**SACRAMENTO REGION, CA (MPG)** - Sacramento Self-Help Housing (SSHH) and HART (Homeless Assistance Resource Team) are proud to announce five local respite centers are now open and available to serve needy individuals and families throughout the area. The respite centers are offered and coordinated by HART with counseling and staffing support provided by Sacramento Self-Help Housing. While separate non-profit agencies, the mission of Sacramento Self-Help Housing and HART are in close alignment. The two organizations work collaboratively to assist those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless by providing much needed services as well as finding and retaining stable and affordable housing.

Staffed by dedicated volunteers, the respite centers are open to adults ages 18 and over (pets welcome) and offer a variety of valuable free services that can vary by location, such as: connection to mainstream services, snacks and/or hot meals (to-go), sense of community, safe and warm place to rest, phone/technology charging stations, complimentary water/coffee, mobile showers, and/or coat donations. While many locations have already been up and running for some time, the five respite centers currently open include the following:



Local respite centers are now open and available to serve needy individuals and families. Photo courtesy T-Rock Communications

**Midtown HART Respite Center** (1 location) – ongoing until further notice; **Tuesdays:** St. John's Lutheran Church of Sacramento at 1701 L Street - Hours: 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

**Carmichael HART Respite Centers** (3 locations) - through March 2; **Tuesdays:** Christ Community Church at 5025 Manzanita Avenue; **Thursdays:** Crossroads Church at 7100 Fair Oaks Blvd; **Saturdays:** Carmichael Presbyterian at 5645 Marconi Avenue  
Hours: 8 a.m. to noon

For more information about HART, please visit [www.hartstogether.org](http://www.hartstogether.org) or email [HARTstogether916@gmail.com](mailto:HARTstogether916@gmail.com); for more about Sacramento Self-Help Housing, please call 916- 508-7616 or visit [www.sacselfhelp.org](http://www.sacselfhelp.org). ★



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Although he was preparing for a career as a professional trumpet player, God had different plans and called Mike into the ministry. He first served as youth pastor and song leader in his local church in East Longmeadow, Mass., before being called to serve as youth pastor and music pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Windsor, Conn. he also attended Northland Baptist Bible College (Dunbar, Wis.) earning a master of ministries degree in Bible. During the ministry at Calvary, Mike and Lori adopted their son, Drew. He also attended Northland Baptist Bible College (Dunbar, Wis.) earning a master of ministries degree in Bible. Mike next served under Dr. Frank Bumpus at Bethel Baptist Church in Schaumburg, Ill., before being called to serve the next 17 years as a school representative and staff evangelist for Bob Jones University. During his time on University staff, Mike traveled the United States, speaking at countless churches, camps, and retreats.

Today, Mike travels as an independent evangelist, preaching and playing his trumpet at ministries across the United States and around the world.

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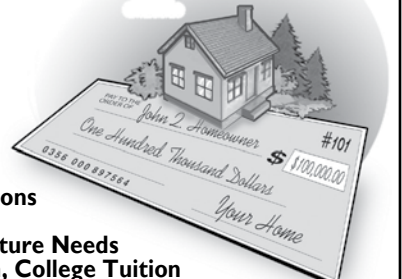
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**Publisher,**  
Paul V. Scholl

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# California's Unemployment Insurance Mess Laid Bare



**Commentary**  
by Dan Walters  
**CALMatters**

The juxtaposition of events this week regarding California's woebegone Employment Development Department (EDD) could not be more ironic.

On Monday, Julie Su, a veteran labor union leader who heads the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, publicly acknowledged that EDD, one of the line departments she oversees, had failed miserably to stop rampant fraud in the distribution of pandemic-related unemployment insurance (UI) benefits.

"There is no sugarcoating the reality," Su told a news conference. "California did not have enough security measures in place."

At least 10% of the \$100-plus billion in state and federal benefits EDD paid out were fraudulent, she said, adding that the final total could be much higher. She laid some of the blame on shoddy rule-making by federal officials but said those failings "do not excuse EDD for being under-prepared."

Organized crime rings and prison inmates filed thousands of fraudulent claims for benefits that EDD readily paid. One reason: EDD had cancelled a contract with a firm that

flagged suspicious claims, then rehired the contractor only after the rampant fraud became apparent.

As Su spoke, political media reported that President Joe Biden has chosen her for the No. 2 spot in the U.S. Department of Labor. They also predicted rough sledding in her Senate confirmation hearings due to the fraud scandal and EDD's truly monumental failures in processing legitimate unemployment insurance claims and causing needless stress to jobless workers and their families.

On Tuesday, State Auditor Elaine Howle issued a damning report on the EDD's failings, while pointing out that they had been evident for many years.

"In mid-March 2020, (unemployment insurance) claims surged to unprecedented levels, and elevated claim levels persisted through October 2020," Howle told Gov. Gavin Newsom and legislators. "Although it would be unreasonable to have expected a flawless response to such an historic event, EDD's inefficient processes and lack of advanced planning led to significant delays in its payment of UI claims."

One passage of Howle's letter was directed at Su. "In spring of 2020," it said, "the secretary of the Labor and Workforce Development Agency directed EDD to pay certain claimants UI benefits without making key eligibility determinations and to temporarily stop collecting biweekly eligibility certifications. Although both directives were designed to provide Californians with benefit payments as quickly as possible, the U.S.

Department of Labor has not waived these requirements and, consequently, EDD now faces a very large impending workload of eligibility certifications that threatens its ability to operate effectively."

"Moreover," Howle said, "EDD struggled to provide claimants assistance with their claims. At the beginning of the claim surge, EDD's call center answered less than 1% of the calls it received. EDD quadrupled its available call center staff to more than 5,600 people in response to its call center problems, but these staff were often unable to assist callers and only marginally improved the percentage of calls it answered."

Howle's report did not delve into the fraud scandal but she will issue another report this week on that aspect and it's not likely to pull any punches.

Su may not be the only political figure tarnished by the auditor's twin reports. They generate more ammunition for the nascent recall campaign against Newsom that's centered on his handling of the pandemic response.

Recall backers, mostly Republican Party leaders and would-be Newsom successors, say they are very close to having enough signatures on petitions to force a recall election. He would be forced to defend why EDD plummeted off the rails, handing out billions of taxpayer dollars to crooks while failing to quickly process legitimate claims.

*Dan Walters has been a journalist for nearly 60 years, spending all but a few of those years working for California newspapers. ★*

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