

## U.S. Department of Education Announces Temporary Changes to the Federal Aid Verification Process for the 2021–22 Award Year



**(U.S. Department of Education)** - Today, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) announced temporary changes to the federal student aid verification process for the 2021–22 award year. The temporary changes will provide relief to millions of students and colleges facing challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department will focus aid verification on identity theft and fraud for the 2021–22 application cycle, significantly reducing other barriers that have prevented students most in need, from accessing critical financial aid funds. Today's action is part of the Department's broader efforts to provide relief to students and borrowers impacted by the pandemic, and address inequities made worse by COVID-19.

While the challenges students experience with verification extend beyond the pandemic, data from the National Student Clearinghouse show college undergraduate enrollment rates fell 4.9 percent in Spring 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 emergency. For students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, those declines were even steeper. These enrollment declines have also been sharpest at community colleges, which saw a 9.5 percent decrease in enrollment and are already significantly resource-constrained due to the economic impacts of the pandemic. Department research shows that targeting verification this aid

cycle, can help approximately 200,000 more students from low-income backgrounds and students of color enroll in college and continue on the path to a degree.

Verification is an administrative process by which the Department requires a subset of federal student aid applicants who are eligible for Pell Grants to submit additional documentation, such as transcripts of tax returns, to verify their income and other information reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. Non-Pell-eligible applicants are not selected for income verification. As a result, the verification process disproportionately burdens students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. The process can be extremely challenging for students, particularly because at least 20 percent of Pell-eligible applicants are exempt from tax filing due to their low-income levels. This prevents them from using the automated Data Retrieval Tool to easily import verified income data from the IRS onto their FAFSA form, and can impose difficulties in acquiring the necessary documentation to prove their income.

Typically, more than three million potential Pell Grant recipients are selected for verification each year. Unfortunately, due to the challenges they face in acquiring the required documentation, some students never complete verification, and thus do not receive the

financial aid they need to enroll. Targeting verification for the 2021–22 FAFSA cycle will make it easier for millions of students from low-income backgrounds to access federal financial aid. It will also alleviate some of the burden faced by financial aid administrators, allowing them to focus their time and resources on administering emergency relief funds, getting students into and through higher education, including by updating FAFSA information for students who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic, and by helping students learn about and access emergency financial aid grants provided under the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund.

This temporary verification process accompanies the many tools and oversight measures the Department uses to monitor suspicious activity, mitigate fraud, and identify over- and under-awards of Pell Grant funds.

Today's announcement builds upon the Biden Administration's commitment to addressing inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and targeting resources and relief efforts toward the colleges and communities that need it most. Under the American Rescue Plan, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, the Department has provided \$76 billion in economic relief for students and colleges impacted by the pandemic.

## Civil rights attorney Lee Merritt, a Democrat, Launches Campaign Against Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton



**Attorney Lee Merritt testified last year during a U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearing to examine issues involving race and policing practices in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd. Credit: REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst/Pool**

by **Patck Svitek**  
**Texas Tribune**

Lee Merritt, the nationally known civil rights attorney, is officially running for Texas attorney general as a Democrat.

Merritt launched his campaign Tuesday morning with an emphasis on the voting rights battle that prompted state House Democrats to flee the state Monday.

"Texas Republicans have launched an all-out assault on voter rights and civil liberties," Merritt said in a statement, adding that incumbent Attorney General Ken Paxton and other GOP leaders are "blatantly attempting to turn back progress in the Lone Star State using the familiar tactics of voter suppression, divisive rhetoric and corporate money. This campaign is a response from the people of Texas," Merritt said.

Merritt said in March that he would run for attorney general but would make a formal announcement at a later

date.

Merritt, who lives in the Dallas area, is nationally recognized for his representation of families of Black people killed by police, including serving as co-counsel for George Floyd's family. Among the Texans he has advocated for are Botham Jean, the Dallas man shot dead by an off-duty cop in his apartment in 2018.

Merritt's campaign announcement will come on the heels of the House Democrats leaving Texas for Washington, D.C., in a bid to deny the quorum for the House to vote on Republicans' priority elections bill. The House is scheduled to convene at 10 a.m. for the first time since Democrats bolted from the state.

In addition to voting rights, Merritt's campaign said it would focus on "fixing Texas' failing power grid, reigning in soaring property taxes, ending mass incarceration and challenging gubernatorial overreach."

Merritt joins Joe Jaworski, a Galveston

lawyer and former mayor of the city, in the Democratic primary against Paxton. The incumbent has his own competitive primary, featuring challenges from Land Commissioner George P. Bush and Eva Guzman, a former justice on the Texas Supreme Court.

Paxton's race has drawn early and intense attention in part due to his legal troubles. He has been under securities fraud indictment since his first months in office in 2015 and more recently, under FBI investigation over claims he abused his office to help a wealthy donor. He has denied wrongdoing in both cases.

Merritt brought up Paxton's legal woes in his video launching his campaign, which also said Paxton has "betrayed his oath" and "pledged his allegiance to Donald Trump." Paxton has aligned himself closely with the former president, who has teased an endorsement in the Republican primary.

# SHAPE Austin's FUTURE

**(CITY OF AUSTIN)** - Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission (ICRC) of Austin will hold the first of ten public input hearings on Thursday, July 15, 2021 at Austin City Hall.

Members of Austin's District 9 community and the public are invited to attend an in-person public meeting to hear from the ICRC and the work being done on the new City Council district maps.

The public will have an opportunity to provide comments and feedback on the redistricting process from 6-8 p.m., Thursday, July 15 at Austin City Hall Boards & Commission Room, 301 W. 2nd St. Austin, TX 78701. The 14 commissioners will take testimony from members of Austin's District 9 community on how they would like to see their city districts drawn.

The new districts will be in effect for the November 2022 election.

A current list of public input meetings: (Meetings will be added as space and times are decided.)

Thursday, July 22, 2021, 6-8 p.m., District 10 Community at Dell Jewish Community Center, 7300 Hart Lane, Austin, TX 78731.

Saturday, July 24, 2021, 11 a.m.- 1 p.m., District 7 Community at Northwest Recreation Center, 2913 Northland Dr., Austin, TX 78757.

Public input hearings are recorded and videos of the meetings will be available after the meetings here: <http://www.austintexas.gov/page/watch-atxn-live>. Past meetings and agendas can be viewed on the commission's website at [www.austintexas.gov/cityclerk/boards\\_commissions/meetings/116\\_1.htm](http://www.austintexas.gov/cityclerk/boards_commissions/meetings/116_1.htm).

To join the meeting visit: <https://zoom.us/j/92300250133?pwd=Mkg1NXd5WG9QZGVCOU5Vlc0M0Jpdz09>

Login with these credentials: Meeting ID: 923 0025 0133 Passcode: 67uSPc

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