

Ballweg on 'UpFront' calls for sustainable, comprehensive approach to addressing farmer mental health

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The Republican lawmaker leading a task force on suicide prevention said struggling farmers will get the mental health help they need, but it has to be done in a sustainable and comprehensive way.

State Rep. Joan Ballweg, R-Markesan, appeared on "UpFront," produced in partnership with WisPolitics.com, after DATCP Secretary-designee Brad Pfaff and GOP Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald clashed over the state's response to farmers who need mental health services.

Pfaff said last week that DATCP's Wisconsin Farm Center, which runs a hotline for farmers, had only five vouchers left for farmers who are in need of counseling. Democrats had asked the Joint Finance Committee to immediately approve more money for vouchers, but the Republican-controlled committee delayed funds.

The GOP leaders of Joint Finance asked DATCP to wait for recommendations from the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention, a bipartisan task force Ballweg is leading.

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The delay prompted Pfaff to issue a news release accusing Republicans of "abandoning" Wisconsin farmers. Fitzgerald responded with a letter to Pfaff calling his comments "flippant" and "inflammatory."

"UpFront" host Adrienne Pedersen asked Ballweg if the situation was urgent and

whether farmers could wait.

“Farmers will be getting the help they need. But what we’re trying to do in this bipartisan task force is to make sure that we have a long-term, sustainable opportunity do this in a comprehensive way,” Ballweg said.

The task force will hold a hearing Monday in Marshfield specifically to hear about farmer suicides, which are thought to be on the rise. The task force is looking at suicides among farmers, veterans, law enforcement officers, and youth, Ballweg said.

Ballweg after the interview criticizing DATCP for giving the “UpFront” program statistics but not responding to inquiries from Ballweg’s office. She added she hopes the agency would be providing additional information as part of its presentation at the hearing Monday.

Ballweg said the task force is learning that agencies, centers, groups and others who work in suicide prevention need to better coordinate their efforts.

“We have a lot of silos,” Ballweg said.

“There is the farm center doing things, there is a national hotline that is supported by the Department of Health Services, counties are doing things, and we need to bring everyone together to use our resources in the best way and give everyone the help that’s needed,” she said.

Ballweg said specialized training to increase awareness of the signs of someone in crisis likely will be one recommendation of the task force, which will make its report in September.

Ballweg said suicide prevention training could be given to community members who interact with people in groups or occupations that have a higher risk for suicide.

“That is the business people and the social supports that are in those communities. The bankers, the veterinarians, which also have a very high rate of suicide, actually. The people at the feed mill, the implement dealer. All of these folks, the faith-based community, all of these folks, to make sure they are aware and can see some of the signs if someone is heading toward a crisis situation,” Ballweg said.

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