

# Jon Erpenbach: Democrats give Republicans a second chance to expand health care

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Last week, I stood with Governor Tony Evers to announce that I was introducing stand-alone legislation to increase the eligibility limit of the Wisconsin Medicaid program to 133% of the federal poverty level. I was happy to have Representative Daniel Riemer (D-Milwaukee) with me, as the author of the Assembly companion.

Today in Wisconsin, if you are a single person who makes \$12,500 a year, you do not qualify for health care assistance. That is not a lot of money. That is not enough money to afford basic necessities. By increasing the number to 133% of the federal poverty level, individuals making up to \$16,612 would be able to qualify for assistance. That change would make a huge difference in the lives of real people. What we are doing with this proposal is helping real people take an extra shift, without fear of losing their health care, and not making them choose between school supplies and insulin.

Expanding Medicaid goes beyond numbers and percentages. Democrats and Republicans heard stories and personal testimony from Wisconsinites who asked for us to put politics aside and expand health care. One of these families reached out to us after a town hall in Stevens Point to tell us their story.

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The Hamman family had identical twins, who were born premature, at 27 weeks, and required extensive medical care, spending several months in the NICU. They

feared that they might lose one or both of their babies, as they were told on several occasions that they would not make it through the night. Thankfully, both of the twins survived and, for the most part, are healthy.

Their family had health insurance, and their 3 million dollars in pre-insurance charges was reduced. However, they still faced \$20,000 in out-of-pocket costs for the twins. Due to their extreme health complications, both twins qualified for Medicaid. Without it, they could have lost their home trying to pay their medical bills.

They had a message that they wanted to share: even though they don't often speak up and prefer to remain quiet on politics, this subject is near and dear to their family. Both of the parents have college degrees from UWSP, and both of them have jobs, but they would have struggled without Medicaid. This is what Logan Hamman had to say: "I want to share my story because I want people to know that individuals who need Medicaid are not always the poor, the homeless or the helpless; individuals like my wife and I need Medicaid."

Their message is plain and simple, Medicaid is health care, not welfare; and their family is not alone in their support. According to a recent Marquette Law School Poll, 70% of Wisconsinites support the expansion.

One reason for the broad support is that it goes beyond benefiting families who are uninsured and underinsured, it would benefit every single person in Wisconsin while strengthening our health care system. This is because by expanding Medicaid, premiums on the individual market will decrease as well. The Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Insurance (OCI) confirmed this fact by releasing a report that established that premiums are 7-11% lower in states that have expanded Medicaid - that's a difference of between \$57 a month, or \$684 per year.

Instead of facing the facts, Republicans are using scare tactics and dog whistles, such as "welfare" and "government-run insurance," in order to muddy the water. When arguing against the expansion, I often hear people quoting studies that are published by unreliable sources, such as the conservative, billionaire-funded law firm, the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL), which has gone out of their way to spread misinformation in order to keep money in the hands of insurance companies, and not the pocketbooks of Wisconsinites.

There is no way to refute the fact that the Medicaid expansion is good for our state.

Wisconsin is among a minority of states that have chosen to save their taxpayers \$2 billion. Instead, we are sending that money to other states, such as Illinois and New Jersey, to expand their health care. Wisconsinites deserve better.

In summary, the Medicaid expansion would make health care affordable for everyone. It will give 40,000 uninsured Wisconsinites health insurance. It will reduce the cost of premiums on the individual market, save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars, and would keep \$2 billion of our federal taxes in Wisconsin. These are proven facts, substantiated by the Department of Revenue, Commissioner of Insurance and Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

This issue is not and should never be political. It is time for us to take action, and join 37 states in expanding health care for our residents. Medicaid is not welfare, it is an investment in Wisconsin and in our health care system. It is the fiscally smart thing to do, and we no longer have the opportunity to ignore this issue. The time to expand health care in Wisconsin is now. The time to cover more Wisconsinites for less is now. Republicans have their second chance, and we should all be putting pressure on them to do what is right.

*- Erpenbach, D-West Point, represents the 27th Senate District.*