

Bill Kaplan: Cheerleading won't end COVID-19 and the recession

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Cheerleading won't end COVID-19 and the recession. To date there are over 2 million COVID-19 cases nationally, including 22,500 in Wisconsin, over 115,000 U.S. deaths, near 700 in WI. Politico reported it took about 3 months to hit 1 million cases, but only 6 weeks to double to over 2 million. And, Wisconsin will soon double cases from the date when GOP legislators and the state Supreme Court ended stay-at-home (no replacement).

However, Trump consistently self-congratulates as the horrific toll rises: "We've made every decision correctly. We may have some embers, or some ashes or we may have some flames coming, but we'll put them out." Except new COVID-19 cases are increasing in 22 states (NYT). "(E)pidemiologists said that even taking into account a rise in testing, the increase in Sun Belt states suggested increased transmissions" (NYT). Moreover, rural Wisconsin could see a surge if tourists return. Finally, the protests against the police murder of George Floyd have resulted in a small (so far) increase, including 1 case in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

The economic news is also grim. When the unemployment rate declined to 16.3 percent, highest rate since the 1930s, Trump declared victory: "This shows that what we've been doing is right. This is outstanding" While Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson breathlessly declared: "I think the shutdown is definitely over and we can really start recovering ... spectacular news". Cheerleading and delusion. You can't see around the corner with long lines of the unemployed at food banks.

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Last week, stocks took a dive, worst since March. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell told the press that millions of jobs may be lost permanently. (Note: over 626,000 Wisconsinites have applied for unemployment benefits since March 15.) The Fed said the economic misery may last years and recovery was “extraordinarily uncertain”. Powell pleaded that “Congress will need to do more”. Are Wisconsin congressional Republicans listening?

The economic collapse and pandemic spell disaster for health care. Prior to COVID-19 and the recession, hundreds of thousands of Wisconsinites lacked health coverage. They included the elderly, white rural Wisconsinites and blacks in cities. However, the rising uninsured rate encompasses the entire state. Over 446,000 Wisconsinites lost their private employer-based health insurance as unemployment increased (Kaiser Family Foundation). Let that catastrophic number sink in: no health coverage means human misery and a collapsing health care system.

Study after study before COVID-19 showed rural Wisconsin hospitals vulnerable – worse now. Moreover, many private medical practitioners may have to close. The GOP-led Wisconsin legislature can do something – expand Medicaid with 90 percent federal funding. The New England Journal of Medicine made the case for expansion amid COVID-19: “Our findings ... are consistent with case studies from several states showing that they have used federal dollars from the Medicaid expansion to offset ... direct subsidies to public hospitals and mental health centers ... and (for) a more generous match rate for optional groups previously covered”

Time to face reality and expand Medicaid. Circumstances have changed.

– Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.