

Bill Kaplan: Coronavirus and rural health care

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There are thousands of coronavirus cases in the U.S., including dozens in Wisconsin. Americans are dying. Democratic and GOP governors are filling the void left by the Trump administration. Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers declared a public health emergency and closed schools. Evers and Department of Health Services Secretary (nominee) Andrea Palm are providing leadership on steps being taken to help and protect Wisconsinites. The coronavirus will hit Democrats, independents and Republicans alike. Moreover, the worsening outbreak requires the GOP-led state Senate to recognize Palm's health care expertise and confirm her ASAP.

Trump has not been reassuring: "For 11 minutes he addressed the nation Wednesday, Trump turned in a laboring performance – one intended to project calm competence that instead seemed to reveal uncertainty . . . He clasped his hands and twiddled his thumbs. He spoke with a curious affect . . ." (Washington Post). The next day the stock market lost 2,353 points! Later, Joe Biden gave a detailed statesmanlike response, grounded in science.

Trump gave it a second shot on Friday. Surrounded by experts and appointees, Trump declared a national emergency, promising for the umpteenth time a speedy delivery of coronavirus testing. But Trump was still Trump: "I don't take responsibility at all" for the botched limited testing. And, he was self-congratulatory: "We are doing a great job" . . ., downplaying the numbers of deaths. Moreover, he falsely claimed Google would "quickly" have a website to help with testing. The stock market 'recovered', for now.

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It was left to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to work out and pass bipartisan legislation to mitigate the economic fallout of the coronavirus. It includes free testing, an increase in state Medicaid payments to help with more patients, provision for sick leave, expanded unemployment insurance and help for food assistance programs. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy praised Pelosi: "Regardless of the partisanship here, at this time in this place, we will come together to put the American public first". All Democratic and most GOP representatives voted yes. However, all four Wisconsin GOP representatives shamefully voted no.

Trump and Congress will have more to do. A Kaiser Family Foundation study said many Americans, including 35 - 40 percent of Wisconsinites (many rural) are at "greater risk of developing serious illness if infected with coronavirus, due to age or underlying health conditions." I asked Mary Wakefield, Ph.D., R.N. and expert on rural health for her thoughts: "Rural communities often face significant health care challenges, including higher rates of uninsured, less access to health care services and shortage of health care providers Additionally, more than their urban counterparts, rural residents tend to have disturbingly higher rates of serious illness like heart disease, cancer and some respiratory diseases, making access to health care critically important."

Emergencies can beget bipartisanship. Governor Evers should immediately tap retiring Wisconsin rural GOP state Senator Luther Olsen as a top rural health adviser to identify options such as Medicaid expansion for increased access to quality care for those at greatest risk in rural Wisconsin. It's urgent.

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