

Bill Kaplan: Coronavirus impacts all of Wisconsin

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Coronavirus impacts the entire nation, with over 530,000 cases and 20,000 plus deaths nationally. The Midwest is a hot spot, with Wisconsin having over 3,200 cases and an increasing death toll. Only a handful of state counties do not yet have confirmed cases. Doctor Ryan Westergaard, chief medical officer of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS), said: "I would characterize the risk in all Wisconsin counties as high." Milwaukee has the worst of it, with stark racial disparities. But no zip code is immune.

The NYT reports: "A new wave of coronavirus cases is spreading deep into rural corners of the country where people once hoped their communities might be shielded because of their isolation from hard-hit urban centers ...". The MJS highlighted a Polk County young dairy farmer recovering from coronavirus. Wisconsin is not out of the woods. Now is not the time to reopen golf courses or permit large gatherings at religious houses of worship, as some misguided state GOP legislators demanded.

Coronavirus is also causing unparalleled economic misery. But with no vaccine or proven treatment, social distancing remains the best defense. Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers and DHS Secretary Andrea Palm have taken the same steps as Democratic and many GOP governors, marching alongside Ohio GOP Governor Mike DeWine. He has been "a national guide to the crisis" and his "early outbreak preparation and intervention may be paying off" (WP). Ohio has fewer cases and deaths than some Midwest states. Might be true for Wisconsin.

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But Trump's initial refusal to take the pandemic seriously has been costly. The WP reported: "70 days of denial, delays and dysfunction". Governors had no recourse but to issue states of emergency and stay at home policies. More than 17 million Americans, including over 313,000 Wisconsinites, have filed for unemployment benefits. The national and Wisconsin jobless rates are moving to 20 percent plus. And, our health care system is threatened as millions lose employer-provided private insurance.

However, Trump refuses to reopen enrollment in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) federal marketplace (covers 38 states), while still supporting having the ACA declared unconstitutional. 11 states with their own marketplaces have reopened enrollment. But Wisconsin doesn't have its own marketplace or Medicaid expansion because of state Republicans' irrational partisan opposition. It's time for state GOP legislators such as Senator Luther Olsen to consider their legacy. Circumstances have changed. Wisconsinites have lost health coverage when needed most. And, the health system in rural Wisconsin is in big trouble.

Study after study (Chartis and Guidehouse – formerly Navigant) show many Wisconsin rural hospitals are financially vulnerable or at risk. Uncompensated care for a disproportionately elderly, ill and poor rural population will be devastating. And, rural hospitals lack intensive care beds, ventilators, nurses and doctors. It is long past time to end the rural-urban divide.

With over 313,000 Wisconsinites losing their jobs and private health insurance, Medicaid expansion with its fiscal benefits is imperative. And, time to support Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin's asking Trump to reopen ACA enrollment.

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