

# Bill Kaplan: Over 100,000 dead, 40 million jobless

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The COVID-19 pandemic has reached shocking milestones. An astounding 1.8 million cases nationally, including more than 18,400 in Wisconsin (WI), over 105,000 U.S. deaths, almost 600 in WI. Records are being set in WI for single-day increases. All 72 WI counties have cases, as do nursing homes, state veteran homes and prisons. No zip code, despite racial disparities, is immune.

However, Trump and Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson want to normalize the carnage, likening COVID-19 fatalities to “car-related deaths”. But the Washington Post (WP) said: “In fact, cars kill about 40,000 people a year... . (And) car accidents aren’t contagious.” Trump, focused on reelection, keeps saying normalcy is around the corner. He prattles on about a “comeback” and “phenomenal” future growth. But political calculation and magical thinking can’t hide that the economy is in shambles. Delay, dysfunction and incompetence have brought us to the abyss.

The U.S. jobless rate is 14.7 percent, while WI is at 14.1 percent; 40 million jobless nationally, including about 500,000 in WI. The Federal Reserve (Fed) has described an economy in free fall: “Economic activity declined in all districts – falling sharply in most.” The Fed said consumer sales, including cars and home sales, plunged. Construction and manufacturing are down. And, farmers face catastrophe from Trump’s continued trade wars, compounded by loss of markets from closed retail businesses and schools. Finally, the Congressional Budget Office predicted that unemployment will rise and not decline below 10 percent until 2021.

The fallout from the COVID-19 economic collapse has been disastrous for health coverage. Studies from the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation estimate that 25-27 million nationally have lost employer-based insurance. KFF reports 446,000 in Wisconsin are “uninsured due to loss of job-based health coverage.” The pandemic has changed circumstances. It’s time for GOP legislators to support Medicaid expansion with its 90 percent federal funding. Their rural constituents, many elderly with preexisting conditions, need it now.

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Rural WI has largely been spared from a COVID-19 surge, in part by WI Democratic Governor Tony Evers' stay-at-home policy (now scuttled by the GOP). However, as COVID-19 restrictions end and tourist season begins that could change tragically. Most rural communities do not have intensive care beds, adequate personal protective equipment, sufficient medical staff or transportation systems. Many rural hospitals were in deep financial trouble prior to COVID-19. Loss of income from canceled elective procedures has brought some facilities to the brink. Medicaid expansion would help. More help will be needed from Congress.

Finally, WI farmers must get targeted federal assistance. Governor Evers has announced that \$50 million in federal COVID-19 aid will be used for direct payments to family farmers. However, the WP reported: "Confusion mars farm-to-families program's rollout. ... (The Trump administration) bypassed the country's three largest food distribution companies, as well as nonprofit organizations (in WI) with long histories of feeding the poor on a large scale ... ." Incompetence!

Farmers are patient, but come November they might "raise less corn (or milk) and more hell."

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