

Bill Kaplan: Wisconsin at a crossroad, expand Medicaid

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Trump says COVID-19 is “under control”, callously downplaying deaths as “it is what it is”. Wisconsin GOP politicians are no better, ending or hindering any policy state Democratic Governor Tony Evers puts forward. Moreover, neither have a plan to control COVID-19.

Cases are soaring, 5 million plus nationally, over 60,000 in Wisconsin. U.S. deaths are about 163,00 and 1,000 in Wisconsin. And, COVID-19 has spread throughout rural Wisconsin. Rural hospitals lack intensive care beds, protective medical equipment and adequate professionals and transit. Additionally, COVID-19 has increased in the GOP WOW counties (Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington). Finally, the state Union Grove Veterans Home has a serious outbreak. The tsunami will worsen.

The economy is in shambles. For the 20h consecutive week more than 1 million filed unemployment claims. Fewer jobs were added. 10.2 percent unemployed nationally, 8.5 percent in Wisconsin and 12.8 percent in Milwaukee. The federal \$600 per week jobless benefit has expired. Declining tax revenue spells catastrophe for state and local governments: \$500 billion in cuts and more than 3 million jobs eliminated. Governor Evers has been forced to propose \$250 million in state budget cuts added to \$70 million made earlier.

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The Democratic-led House passed a COVID-19 bill in mid-May, extending federal \$600 jobless benefit, funding education, food assistance, health, housing and

pension needs. It helped state, local and tribal governments facing huge budget holes. Trump was dismissive and the GOP-led Senate did nothing. Finally, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell proposed an inadequate take-it-or-leave-it bill. Last minute talks began between House-Senate Democratic leaders and White House officials, without McConnell and Trump. Predictably the talks collapsed last week, despite Democrats reducing the cost of their bill. Trump and McConnell didn't want a deal.

“Trump on Saturday attempted to bypass Congress and make dramatic changes to tax and spending policy, signing executive actions that challenge the boundaries of power that separate the White House and Capitol Hill” (Washington Post). Trump replaced the expired \$600 jobless benefit with a new \$400 program, funded by disaster-hurricane relief money and states (with budget shortfalls). Fool's gold! Same with Trump's attempt to defer Social Security payroll taxes without any future recoupment. This will not help the unemployed, but only undermine Social Security. And, the eviction memo is just words, no aid to renters and home owners in arrears.

However, voters are smart, and will see through Trump's scheme as they have his attempts to kill the ACA. Case in point. Last Tuesday, Missouri voters approved Medicaid expansion (38th state). COVID-19 and high unemployment with loss of health insurance woke voters up. The 90 percent federal funding would cover over 200,000, fund struggling rural hospitals, create jobs and increase state tax revenue. Circumstances changed.

It's long past time for the Wisconsin GOP-led legislature to accept that Medicaid expansion in Wisconsin would cover more, substitute federal funding for state funding and save state spending on uncompensated care, mental health and drug-alcohol treatment. This federal funding is available; more may not be coming. Face reality. Voters will.

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