

DC Wrap: Baldwin seeks answers from meat processors on COVID-19 spread; Republicans call for state to begin reopening

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Welcome to our weekly DC Wrap, where we write about Wisconsin's congressional delegation. Sign up here to receive the newsletter directly: <https://forms.gle/YLYZtjWHPSt24HhZ7>

Quotes of the week

"One area where obviously mistakes have been made by the powers that be ... in Washington and Madison is the huge number of non-essential procedures that have not been done. It's almost certainly costing lives."

-U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman on hospitals admitting only COVID-19 cases.

"Most of the federal level guidance that has been put out is voluntary, and it's not acceptable if an employer chooses not to follow those voluntary guidelines."

-U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin calling for an Emergency Temporary Standard by the Department of Labor to keep factory workers safe.

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This week's news

— After reports that meat processing plants played a role in spreading of the coronavirus in Wisconsin, U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin called on the three biggest plants in the state to provide answers.

Baldwin said employees in a JBS USA plant account for more than a third of all Brown County infections; there's another 86 cases in Milwaukee from a Patrick Cudahy Smithfield Foods Plant. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration is investigating both plants after allegations employees are not being given proper protective equipment and were encouraged to stand close together and come into work sick.

"This unwillingness to implement recommended safety precautions in a timely manner has led to death and the spread of illness from COVID-19 that was preventable," Baldwin, D-Madison, said in the letter.

In April, the Centers for Disease Control issued voluntary guidelines for the meat packing industry to follow, but it's unclear how stringently those guidelines were implemented. President Trump last week signed an executive order aimed at compelling meat processing plants to remain open.

"In some instances, workers and their local unions repeatedly asked companies to implement preventive measures, but to no avail," Baldwin wrote.

This letter comes about a month after Baldwin previously introduced a bill that would require an Emergency Temporary Standard be issued by OSHA to ensure guidelines are being followed.

"Now, 5,000 workers in the meatpacking industry either have COVID-19 or have been forced to self-quarantine and 20 workers have died," Baldwin said, citing nationwide statistics.

Seven meat packing plants nationwide have suspended operations since the CDC guidelines were released. President Trump released an executive order aimed at helping the industry, citing unsafe working conditions and possibilities for the plants to become small epicenters. All Wisconsin plants have stayed open or reopened since the executive order.

See the letter [here](#).

— The Republican members of the state's congressional delegation are calling for Wisconsin to begin to reopen, starting with select non-essential businesses.

"I do think it's time to reopen," U.S. Rep. Mike Gallagher said [in a Sunday interview](#). "We've got businesses that believe they can do that responsibly now, we should support them, we should empower them."

U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson said he believed "there are a lot of businesses that probably shut down that didn't need to."

"I would start, by the way, with our healthcare system, then really take a look at businesses that are shut down that can maintain social distancing and literally can operate safely," Johnson, R-Oshkosh, said.

U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman, R-Glenbuelah, called on health experts to "admit they overestimated hospitalizations."

"I think national health experts kind of oversold how crowded our hospitals would be in Wisconsin," he said on a [morning talk show](#). "If you need a stint, you should be able to get a stint."

The lawmakers say they aren't for the total reopening of the state, but rather for opening targeted businesses.

"The old 'normal' will take a few months, right, we're not going to go back to large gatherings," Gallagher said. "I hope we are at Lambeau celebrating our country getting out of this crisis in the fall."

— Gallagher also announced that Wisconsin had received a donation of 100,000 surgical masks from Taiwan.

"I am tremendously grateful for the hard work of Ambassador Stanly Kao, Vincent Chao, and the entire team at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Affairs Office, along with President Tsai for helping to secure this generous donation," the Green Bay congressman said.

Taiwan has donated millions of masks all around the world, including two million to Japan, 500,000 to Canada, and 300,000 to the Philippines, among others. The Taiwanese government hopes to donate [10 million masks](#) by the end of the pandemic.

“This is very welcome news,” said Eric Borgerding, president of the Wisconsin Hospital Association. “We need these masks and other material in our hospitals and clinics today as the health care system begins emerging from this pandemic.”

Gov. Tony Evers will have final discretion for where the masks end up in the state once they arrive.

See the release [here](#).

— U.S. Rep. Ron Kind helped introduce legislation that would ensure college students would be eligible to receive aid after being left out of the original coronavirus response bill.

Under the federal CARES act, all adults received a \$1,200 check and parents that claim a dependent received \$500. But no credit was given to dependents above 16 years of age, which left many late high school and college students ineligible for financial aid.

“College students’ lives were particularly uprooted by this crisis, often losing not only their homes but in many cases jobs as well,” Kind said in a release. “With so many experiencing economic hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we must ensure all Wisconsinites receive the support they need,” the La Crosse Dem said.

See the release [here](#).

— As the Senate reconvenes this week, a top House leader says the chamber will extend its recess away from Washington on the recommendation of Congress’ attending physician.

“The House physician’s view was that there was a risk to members that was one he would not recommend taking,” Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said during a teleconference. “We will not come back next week, but we hope to come back very soon to consider the CARES 2 legislation.”

Until the House can reconvene, members will continue to meet virtually from their districts.

While Dems in the House have generally been positive on the decision to push the recess, GOP members have been less receptive.

“The House should be in session now, getting answers for the American public,” U.S. Rep. Bryan Steil of Janesville [tweeted](#) Monday.

“Construction workers, factories, food processors, farmers, grocery store employees & more are working,” Rep. Grothman said in a [tweet](#). “Congress should join them and begin to re-open safely!”

But Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., highlighted that the nation’s capital sits near two hotspot counties, and thousands of people — such as cafeteria workers and security — would also need to be brought back in.

“We had no choice,” Pelosi said. “If the Capitol physician recommends that we not come back, then we have to take that guidance in the interest of the safety of the people who work here.”

Gallagher disagreed with that sentiment.

“This is insane. Every day we ask our healthcare workers and first responders to risk their health to fight the virus,” the Green Bay Republican said in a [tweet](#). “Yet now another week will go by without Congress back in session. We need to lead by example, get back to work, and help our constituents.”

It is currently unclear when the House will return from its recess. The Senate will continue to meet in Washington as planned for the near future.

— Dems in the state delegation wrote to House and Senate leadership to ensure those who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program are prioritized in the next coronavirus relief bill.

“In these challenging times, more and more families in Wisconsin and across the country are struggling to put food on their tables,” the members wrote in their letter. “SNAP is one of our nation’s most important safety nets to lift children, families, and seniors out of poverty, and during this crisis, the program will continue to be a vital line of defense against hunger and malnutrition.”

They highlighted the unprecedented need for the food stamps program in the state as the coronavirus pandemic stretches into May. The group also asked for a 15 percent increase to families benefits, as well as raising the minimum allowance to \$30 from \$16.

“As we face historic economic and social disruption during this pandemic, we must bolster the SNAP program and ensure access for those Wisconsinites who need food assistance,” they wrote.

See the release [here](#).

Posts of the week

It was great talking to [@PFFW](#) today. I am working to include additional funding for states and local governments in the next legislative package to help deal with budgets and lost revenue, keep firefighters on payroll, and provide essential public services for the community.

<https://t.co/cihz5ofOjO>

— Sen. Tammy Baldwin (@SenatorBaldwin) [May 5, 2020](#)

I refuse to let my Native American sisters' struggles be ignored. I am proudly joining [@RepDavids](#) and [@RepDebHaaland](#) in raising awareness about the [#MMIW](#) crisis by supporting the [#NotInvisibleAct](#).

<pic.twitter.com/MOswYVtFEC>

— Rep. Gwen Moore (@RepGwenMoore) [May 5, 2020](#)

Thank you teachers! It's [#TeacherAppreciationDay](#). Impacts of

coronavirus have led to school closures and forced our teachers to educate students in new ways. To all the teachers out there, I want to say thank you! [#TeacherAppreciationWeek2020 pic.twitter.com/XHoJA5bZ1x](https://twitter.com/XHoJA5bZ1x)

— Bryan Steil (@RepBryanSteil) [May 5, 2020](#)

I am proud to announce that [@MOFA_Taiwan](#) will be delivering 100,000 surgical grade masks to Wisconsin. Our state is a place where common sense is a common virtue, and we understand both our friends and foes. It is clear that we have few better friends than Taiwan.
pic.twitter.com/dsYyOsf3KH

— Rep. Gallagher Press Office (@RepGallagher) [May 5, 2020](#)

Wisconsin innovation on display! Great work by Milwaukee manufacturers working together to quickly develop a new reusable face mask.
<https://t.co/xVu8w5yuXG>

— Senator Ron Johnson (@SenRonJohnson) [May 5, 2020](#)

ICYMI

[Why does Johnson think masks are 'probably' unneeded on the Hill?](#)
[U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin asks Trump Administration for farmer assistance](#)
[Mark Pocan: To reopen Wisconsin we need testing, testing, testing](#)
[Steil advises reopening with localized, data-driven approach](#)
[Rep. Gallagher, Sen. Johnson push to reopen more businesses](#)
[Rep. Gwen Moore calls for increased coronavirus testing](#)