

# Eric Hovde: Wisconsin's reopening is necessary for the well-being of our residents

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Recently, I ran a television ad across our state asking Governor Evers several questions about the extended lockdown and its negative effects on our residents' livelihoods and health. A large amount of people thanked me for trying to get our state reopened. However, others speculated whether I did this to position myself for a future political race or attacked me like it was a political campaign.

I thought it would be helpful to share what motivated me to make the commercial and spend my own money to run the ad. Two weeks after the first lockdowns were put in place, I had, within 24 hours, talked with 5 different owners of businesses who had to shut down and lay off most of their employees. Most of these individuals were in tears describing this as the worst day of their lives. I realized then that if these lockdowns lasted much longer, it would have a devastating impact on businesses, jobs and our residents' health. Since then Wisconsin's unemployment has skyrocketed to over 500,000 citizens being out of a job. This is incredibly sad from an economic standpoint, but it is even more troubling from a health perspective.

Joblessness and severe financial stress are directly linked to numerous health risks. Studies have shown that heart attacks and strokes rise by over 100% when people are under meaningful financial stress. The linkage between suicides and joblessness have been well researched since the Great Depression, when suicides spiked to unprecedented levels. Every 1% percent increase in unemployment is responsible for a 1% increase in the suicide rate. Drug use is more than double the rate for the unemployed at 18.2% versus 9.1% for people who are fully employed. In fact, the opioid epidemic, which has taken over 60,000 lives annually for almost a decade in the US, took its roots during the Great Recession. There are a myriad of other health problems that also develop when people's finances deteriorate such as not seeking

proper medical care or delaying screening for diseases such as cancer, along with an increase in mental health issues. My concern is that we will lose more lives to these health problems than the virus will ever kill.

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Another concern is what we are doing to our younger generations. Thankfully, COVID-19 has very little effect on our young from a disease standpoint, but the lockdowns have dealt a devastating impact to their lives in numerous ways. Their education has been fundamentally disrupted, important life milestones, such as graduation, are being lost and their entry into the job market has been crushed. All of this will affect their lives for years to come, but these will not be the worst impacts. Our younger generations will have to pick up the tab for the massive deficits our country is running to prevent a complete economic collapse. The \$5 trillion deficit we will run this year, on top of the \$23 trillion we have built up over our country's history, has put an enormous financial burden on them that will deplete resources in the future for education, health care, defense and social security. The only way we will be able to manage this debt will be through a meaningful reduction in spending and much higher taxes and inflation, which will lower the standard of living for decades to come.

Another major concern I have is that the lockdowns will have bankrupted a significant portion of our small businesses, which are the job engine of America. Small businesses employ approximately 60 million Americans and provide vibrancy to our labor markets. If we lose these entrepreneurs, we will be stuck with much higher rates of unemployment for years to come. Equally important, our small restaurants, bars, retail shops, local newspapers and hotels play an important role in the fabric of our communities; as they disappear, it will be a loss to all of us. As small businesses collapse it will also have the negative effect of concentrating more wealth and power to huge corporations like Amazon and Walmart. Is this really the outcome we want?

The Coronavirus, and our public policy reaction to it, should not be turned into a partisan political issue, which is why I did not attack Governor Evers, but simply asked questions of him. The data is clear: cases and deaths are both far below what

was projected (with the lockdown factored in), and our hospitals never came close to being overrun. However, the destruction to careers, jobs, and small businesses have hit depression levels, and the risk to the public's health because of this has increased substantially. Public health policy should not be focused on one risk, but should take a broader view of all aspects of health.

Finally, we have learned a lot more about COVID-19, and most of it is encouraging. The death rate that was once feared to be between 2.5% to 4% is now clearly under 1%. Further, unlike the flu, it has little effect on our children, and the young and healthy have a minor impact. I would encourage the Governor to put our resources into protecting the elderly and sick, where the risk exists, and put our state's economy back on track!

*— Hovde is an entrepreneur who started and manages numerous business enterprises. He earned his degrees in economics and international relations at UW-Madison. Hovde resides in Madison, Wisconsin and is married with two children. He ran in the 2012 GOP primary for U.S. Senate.*