

Jon Erpenbach: It's well-past time for Wisconsin to expand Medicaid

Posted on Friday, Aug 21, 2020

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WEST POINT – In this month's primary election, Missouri voted to expand Medicaid. The initiative that made its way onto the ballot will expand coverage to about 230,000 low-income residents, and was supported by over 53% of voters, making Missouri the 38th state, and the sixth Republican-led state, to do so. When given the chance to be heard, Missouri's citizens said 'yes' to providing medical coverage to those who need it most – and it's time for Wisconsin to follow-suit.

Despite the fact that an overwhelming 70% of Wisconsinites support expanding Medicaid, legislative Republicans have spent the last nine years playing politics and refusing to accept federal dollars that would extend coverage to tens of thousands of our state's most vulnerable citizens. And Wisconsinites have been paying the price, literally. In this budget cycle alone, accepting Medicaid funding would've saved \$324.5 million in state taxpayer money, and brought in over \$1.6 billion in additional federal dollars for health care services that could benefit our struggling rural hospitals and clinics. Instead, our taxpayer money is going towards the expansion of Medicaid programs in other states like Illinois and New York.

While it's clear that when it comes to crunching the numbers, our state is much better off accepting the Medicaid expansion money, there's an even more compelling reason to do so. We're in the midst of a global pandemic. People are sick and dying, and we need to take action, now.

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Since March, Wisconsin has seen more than 70,000 COVID-19 cases, leading to

more than 1,000 deaths. And with workplaces shutting down or laying off employees as a result of this pandemic, thousands of people are losing medical coverage during the worst public health crisis of our lifetime. Not to mention all of the folks who fall into the coverage gap by not quite meeting income restrictions under our state's current Medicaid policy – many of which, like grocery and transportation workers, are considered 'essential,' and are expected to face the threat regardless of their ability to fight the virus or afford the medical bills should they contract it.

Bottom line, far too many Wisconsinites are without coverage, making our state even more vulnerable to the threat at hand. And, if you ask me, if our system is failing us during such a clear time of need, it's broken, and something needs to be done to fix it.

With Missouri voting to expand Medicaid, the people of America have made it clearer than ever – they do not support Republican agendas that put politics before the health of their fellow citizens. If this pandemic has taught us one thing, it's that we need to care for one another. And that starts with your legislature fighting for what's best. I encourage you to call on your Republican representatives to do their jobs and act on legislation that would allow us to join the 38 other states that have expanded their Medicaid programs. Because every single person in Wisconsin deserves access to affordable healthcare. Especially during a global pandemic.

-Erpenbach, D-West Point, represents the 27th Senate District.