

Sen. Larson: Statement on GOP COVID package

Posted on Thursday, Dec 3, 2020

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Milwaukee, WI - In the midst of a pandemic in our state that has infected almost 400,000 people, sent over 17,000 to the hospital, and killed over 3,500, it's clear that what we are doing right now is not working. The legislature has not passed a bill in over 230 days, despite numerous, desperate calls from citizens, Governor Evers, and legislative Democrats to address our biggest challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic chief among them.

It was with a glimmer of optimism that I read through the package of legislation proposed Tuesday by Assembly Republicans. I hoped that - like April's Act 185 - there would be enough good things in it for me to put politics aside and support it. My hopes were dashed when I realized that this wasn't so much a COVID-19 relief package as a political power grab and a direct assault on local control and public education. If passed in its entirety, it would only make the situation we now face even worse.

Wisconsin needed a lifeline. What it got was an obstacle course. With a whopping 50 provisions spread out among 16 different areas of state government, there isn't enough time to cover each one here, but if we look only at those provisions affecting the Departments of Health Services (DHS) and Public Instruction (DPI), we get a good idea of the carrots, sticks, and poison pills contained in this GOP bill package. For every good thing, there is a counterweight, omission, or outright sabotage that makes this a clear political document, not a pandemic response.

[Health Services \(DHS\)](#)

The Good

- Ensuring healthcare providers are adequately reimbursed for services performed for MA patients
- Ensuring testing and vaccination is covered under MA and SeniorCare
- Increasing local public health staffing capacity
- Expanding rapid antigen testing
- Extending the use of the current Public Health Emergency Dashboard to future pandemics

The Bad

- Setting an arbitrary end date of June 30th for several provisions, instead of tying sunset to meeting public health benchmarks
- Failing to guarantee funding for the additional public health staff
- Putting the GOP-controlled Joint Finance Committee (JFC) in control of vaccine distribution plan

The Deadly

- Restricting local health departments' ability to impose capacity restrictions on businesses
- Prohibiting employers (including nursing homes) from requiring COVID-19 vaccinations for staff
- Prohibiting health departments from limiting gathering at churches (while remaining oddly silent on synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship)
- Forcing nursing homes to allow visitors in their facilities, which contain the most vulnerable populations

Public Instruction (DPI)

The Good

- Grants for schools to purchase personal electronic devices to facilitate distance learning

The Bad

- Forcing school districts to accept open enrollment students outside the normal process

- Forcing teachers to teach from school buildings by January 31
- Forcing districts to approve virtual schooling by $\frac{2}{3}$ majority, and re-authorizing every 2 weeks

The Sabotage

- Paying parents whose children attend virtual school for at least 50% of the semester \$371, which would cost Milwaukee Public Schools alone over \$28 million

The icing on the cake of this GOP power grab is that it takes away authority for spending federal relief money from the governor and puts it squarely in their own hands. This is just another step in their quest to kneecap a sitting Governor from being able to effectively do his job, a quest which began in the lame-duck session in 2018, before Governor Evers had even taken office.

I am thrilled that my colleagues in the Republican Party have finally woken up and recognized that something needs to be done to address the out-of-control pandemic in our state. If this is their opening salvo, we have a long way to go to reach a place where it could earn my v