

# Assembly Republicans, Dems offer competing COVID-19 bills as Evers pushes his own legislation

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Assembly Republicans and Dems released their own COVID-19 bills as Gov. Tony Evers pressed lawmakers to quickly pass the legislation he sent them last month to deal with the pandemic.

The competing efforts came as lawmakers yesterday took their oaths of office for the 2021-22 session with some lawmakers participating in person, some virtually and some skipping the festivities altogether amid ongoing concerns about safety protocols in the building.

Assembly Republicans were poised to move quickly on their bill with a committee hearing and exec planned for today and a floor vote scheduled for Thursday.

Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, said Republicans in both chambers have already agreed to its language and called on lawmakers to pass it by the end of the week.

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Senate Republicans plan to caucus today, and Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, didn't immediately offer any public comment on the bill.

"This bill includes many items from our bipartisan discussions," Vos said. "However, our Constitution can never be placed on hold, even during times of a public health emergency. We can't allow an unelected bureaucrat to rule over our communities like a dictator, picking and choosing what businesses should fail or forcing schools to be virtual."

Vos blamed "government reactions" to the virus for many Wisconsinites' loss of

livelihoods, arguing the pandemic showed most people do not support heavy government intervention.

During the session Vos also praised frontline workers for going to their jobs, and he held a moment of silence on the Assembly floor for those who died during the pandemic.

Vos was listed as the only author of the bill, which will receive a public hearing and a vote by the Health Committee today.

Vos last month also released a COVID-19 bill, and the new version includes some of the same provisions. Among them: giving the Joint Finance Committee the power to transfer \$100 million from other appropriations to deal with COVID-19 costs; and a ban on the Department of Health Services and local health officers from closing or forbidding gatherings in places of worship in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It also includes a provision that would bar employers from requiring workers to get a COVID-19 vaccine as a condition of their employment. Another would prohibit DHS and local health officials from requiring individuals to receive the vaccine.

According to the bill, current law allows DHS to order someone to get a vaccination during a state of emergency declared by the gov except for certain medical exemptions or religious reasons. It also would allow dentists to administer the vaccine.

The previous Assembly GOP bill sought to require school districts that move to virtual instruction to reimburse parents. The new legislation drops that provision. Still, it would require districts to get a two-thirds vote of their school boards to move to virtual instruction. School boards would have to reauthorize the move every 14 days.

Districts that go virtual also would have to report to the Department of Public Instruction how the move impacted their expenses. Reports would be required after each semester in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years.

The COVID-19 bill approved in April suspended the one-week waiting period between when someone claims unemployment and begins receiving checks. The suspension is currently expected to end Feb. 7. The bill would extend that to March 14.

See the bill [here](#).

See the public hearing notice [here](#).

See the exec session notice [here](#).

See the proposed calendar [here](#).

Meanwhile, Evers pressed lawmakers to take up the COVID-19 bill he released last month.

“Time is of the essence, and frankly, we cannot delay any longer,” Evers wrote in a letter to all lawmakers. “It is time to move forward on legislation where there is agreement.”

Evers last month described the bill as a representation of the compromises he had discussed with GOP legislative leaders. But LeMahieu and Vos rejected that description.

They each accused Evers of deciding to “back away” from negotiations by releasing the bill.

Among other things, it would allow out-of-state health care providers to temporarily work in Wisconsin, give the Joint Finance Committee the power to pull together \$100 million to pay for public health costs and ensure SeniorCare covers vaccinations.

Evers last month sent a separate bill to lawmakers that included \$466 million he’s been pushing to cover costs for COVID-19 testing and contact tracing through the first quarter of 2021.

See the release [here](#).

Assembly Dems’ bill includes a couple of additions to what Evers wants, including expanding Medicaid through the Affordable Care Act.

The bill includes the \$466 million that Evers has called for to cover testing, contract tracing, and vaccine distribution and awareness.

It also includes provisions from what Dems called the Health Care Heroes Act to

require employers to provide hazard pay to certain health care workers during a public health emergency. It also calls for them to receive paid sick leave due to COVID-19, and state-funded testing and treatment. The bill would allow employers to request reimbursement from the Department of Administration to cover paid medical leave and hazard pay.

The bill doesn't include giving the gov any new powers to issue orders such as mask mandates or restrictions on public gatherings. The state Supreme Court has heard arguments challenging such steps.

Minority Leader Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, said there were other things the caucus wanted to include in the bill, but would require resources only the federal government could provide. He called the legislation a "bridge" until a vaccine is widely available.

"We aren't doing pie-in-the-sky stuff," he said.

Hintz's office estimates the bill's price tag at \$600 million in general purpose revenue, though that would be offset by the additional money from the federal government to expand Medicaid.

Evers told WisPolitics.com late last month he would again propose expanding Medicaid in his upcoming budget.

See the Assembly Dem bill [here](#).

See the overview [here](#).