

Bill Kaplan: Baldwin helps boost vaccinations and health care coverage

Posted on Monday, Mar 8, 2021

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The U.S. leads the world with 28.9+ COVID-19 cases and over 524,000 deaths. Wisconsin has had 566,000+ cases and about 6,500 deaths. This catastrophe and resultant economic carnage could have been mitigated if the previous administration had been more competent and informed. President Joe Biden is moving forward to end the pandemic and restore the economy.

Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin supported: “Senate passage of (the) American Rescue Plan (ARP) to vaccinate more Wisconsinites and expand access to affordable healthcare coverage during (the) COVID-19 pandemic.” Baldwin is not alone. The American Hospital and Medical Associations, private healthcare insurers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said: “Despite decades of evidence linking coverage to better healthcare access and health outcomes, the COVID-19 pandemic has put the link between the two in stark relief.”

These groups supported ARP provisions to expand Affordable Care Act (ACA) coverage by increasing subsidies to the middle class and lower-income people to purchase ACA private insurance. The group also supported ARP generous financial incentives for 12 states, including Wisconsin, that have not adopted ACA Medicaid expansion. They get it that millions of Americans lost healthcare coverage along with their jobs because of the pandemic.

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However, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson continues to act like a know-nothing. Opposing the ARP, Johnson forced Senate clerks to read the entire bill out loud (11 hours!) to obstruct passage. Some GOP senators questioned Johnson's tactics. North Dakota GOP Senator Kevin Cramer said: "I'm not sure it really makes a point. It doesn't punish anybody except members of the staff ... and pretty much all 100 senators." But Johnson hears conspiratorial voices, calling the ACA "the greatest single threat to my freedom" Moreover, he has repeatedly voted to repeal the ACA, ending coverage for over 20 million, including 200,000+ Wisconsinites and consumer protections, covering preexisting conditions (one million+ Wisconsinites). Johnson doesn't hear those without healthcare coverage.

Despite Johnson's grandstanding, the ARP is near final passage. All Wisconsin Democratic members of Congress supported the ARP, while all Wisconsin GOP members opposed. Baldwin said: "We have not beaten this pandemic (variants) and people are still struggling in Wisconsin and across the country. We need to take bold action to address the ongoing public health and economic crises ... The American Rescue Plan is the investment our state needs to beat the pandemic, save our economy, and start getting our lives back to normal."

President Biden already took immediate executive action to expand healthcare coverage. He reopened the ACA federal marketplace for three months to enable Americans to purchase ACA private insurance. During the first two weeks of February, 206,000+ Americans, including 3,000+ Wisconsinites, signed up. The Wisconsin Commissioner of Insurance is promoting enrollment. However, if the Wisconsin Stop the COVID Spread coalition joined their national counterparts in supporting expansion more could be achieved by the group's running Wisconsin focused PSAs, TV-radio and social media ads. Let's all defeat COVID-19 and extend healthcare coverage. There is a clear link between the two.

- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.