

Bill Kaplan: Democratic-led House passes COVID-19 relief

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The pandemic continues to devastate the U.S., with 28.5+ million cases and 512,000+ deaths. Wisconsin has had over 563,000 cases and 6,400+ deaths. There is hope with vaccinations increasing, but masks and physical distancing remain essential, given the emergence of more contagious virus variants. Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin has introduced legislation to greatly increase identification of these mutations to help control more rapid spread.

The virus has also pulverized the economy. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said: "The economic recovery remains uneven ... and the path ahead is highly uncertain. There is a long way to go." Moreover, Powell indicated that the real unemployment rate is "close to 10 percent." While Wisconsin has a lower jobless rate than some states, hundreds of thousands of jobs are gone. And, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) reported: 334,000 adult Wisconsinites had "difficulty getting enough food" for their families, 156,000 Wisconsinites are "not caught up on rent" and 1,219,000 Wisconsinites are having "difficulty covering usual household expenses."

President Joe Biden told governors: "We just have to step up (to the) economic toll (and) address with the same aggressiveness and seriousness of purpose as we do the virus. And that's what the American Rescue Plan (COVID-19 relief) does." Polls show most Americans, including many Republicans, support Biden. More than 160 CEO's told Congress: "The American Rescue Plan provides a framework for coordinated public-private efforts to overcome COVID-19 and to move forward with a new era of inclusive growth. The country's business community is prepared to work with you to achieve these critical objectives."

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On Saturday morning the Democratic-led House passed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) 219-212 along party lines. All Wisconsin Democratic representatives voted yes and all Wisconsin GOP representatives opposed. The bill was passed under the reconciliation process so it can't be stalled or killed by a Senate filibuster. Earlier, Wisconsin Democratic Representative Ron Kind said: "It's been more than a year since the first case of COVID-19 was discovered in the United States. (And,) our nation continues to face both a public health and economic crisis due to this pandemic. ... This COVID-19 relief package takes meaningful steps to support struggling families, end the public health emergency and get our economy back on track."

The ARP provides: funding to control COVID-19, \$1,400 payments (excludes affluent), extends-enlarges unemployment benefits, enhances Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for childless workers, expands Child Tax Credit for child-care expenses, improves retirement security through help for troubled multiemployer pension plans, reduces Affordable Care Act private insurance premiums, funds safe school re-openings, small business relief, aid for farmers, assistance to local-state-tribal governments, and help for food and housing.

The CBPP said: 321,000 Wisconsinites would be helped by EITC expansion, 1,159,000 Wisconsin children would benefit from the Child Tax Credit expansion and 738,000 Wisconsinites would get more food aid. Regrettably, the House bill's \$15 minimum wage provision was overruled by the Senate parliamentarian for the Senate's reconciliation bill. However, the ARP will accelerate Wisconsin's health and economic recovery.

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