

# Bill Kaplan: Despite Wisconsin COVID-19 heroes, surge is back

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Last November, 2020, I spoke with Doctor Bill Melms, chief medical officer, Marshfield Clinic Health System. He said: “We are at a tipping point in Wisconsin. As we continue to see increases in the daily rate of new cases of COVID-19, we must expect that the number of hospitalized patients (and deaths) will increase as well.” Vaccines brought hope and relief. However, 40 percent of state residents are still not partially (1 shot) or fully (2 shots) vaccinated. Many adults with 2 shots have not gotten a recommended third shot. And, children remain acutely under-vaccinated.

Hence a new state COVID-19 surge. Cases and hospitalizations are setting new one-day counts for 2021, about 870,000 cases and 9,000 deaths in total. Children are getting hit hard, over 140,000 children under 18 have tested positive for COVID-19. Although less likely to be hospitalized or die, these children could face long-term medical problems (heart, lung and neurological).

What is maddening is that more vaccinations would end the pandemic and protect against new variants. Wall Street knows this — the stock market plunged 905 points on reports of a new variant in South Africa spreading to Europe. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services reported that the unvaccinated were nearly five times more likely to get COVID-19, eleven times more likely to be hospitalized and fifteen times more likely to die than the vaccinated.

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Wisconsin COVID-19 heroes have been trying hard from the beginning to control and end this tragedy. Doctor Susan Turney, CEO of Marshfield Clinic Health System,

along with Doctor Melms and their heroic staff, have led the way in rural Wisconsin. Turney and Melms are spotlighting and addressing disparities in rural Wisconsin. Their “physician-sponsored health plan, Security Health, has been a leader in the ACA (Affordable Care Act) marketplace in Wisconsin ... .” This meant the elderly, sick and low-income had healthcare coverage. And, they got their healthcare staff fully vaccinated in an area where there has been “very, very strong vaccine resistance.”

UW System President Tommy Thompson is also a COVID-19 hero. From the beginning he sent UW nursing and pharmacy students around the state to test for COVID-19 and vaccinate Wisconsinites. Thompson has written op-eds, held press interviews and rallies at UW campuses to explain and extol vaccination. Moreover, he led a successful campaign at UW campuses – 70 percent vaccination rates with lucky vaccinated students receiving \$7,000 scholarships. And, Thompson exceeded 90 percent vaccination at UW-Madison. A brainy conservative with a big heart.

My last COVID-19 hero is my old friend, educator Howard Fuller. He has always had respect for and rapport with Milwaukee Black teenagers. They know he really cares. So it is critical that he is trying to convince them to get vaccinated. Moreover, he is collaborating with a group funded by the National Institutes of Health – Fight COVID MKE. The Stop the COVID Spread Coalition should urge Fuller to do a PSA encouraging vaccination.

Our COVID-19 heroes deserve everyone’s support. Protect yourself and others, get vaccinated now.

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