

Bill Kaplan: Healthcare realities face Speaker Vos

Posted on Monday, Apr 5, 2021

The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.

There is simultaneous hope and danger in ending the pandemic. Although Wisconsin is in the top tier of vaccinations, the crisis is not over. Cases are up significantly nationally and somewhat in Wisconsin. Moreover, more contagious variants are widespread. Masking remains critical. The American Hospital, Medical and Nurses Associations have said “wearing a face mask” is necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19. JAMA reported: “An evaluation of state policies showed greater declines in daily COVID-19 cases after issuing mask mandates compared with states that did not have mandates.” Over 30 states, including 9 GOP-led states, have mask mandates.

However, Wisconsin’s mask mandate has ceased. Know-nothing GOP legislators and their callous business supporters persuaded the state Supreme Court to overturn Democratic Governor Tony Evers’ effort to protect all Wisconsinites. Furthermore, the decision could cost Wisconsin \$50 million per month in federal food assistance. Sherrie Tussler, Hunger Task Force, said: “That’s \$50 million that would be spent on Wisconsin food at our grocery stores. It would help food producers. It would help farmers. It would help our struggling dairy industry.”

Instead of shooting himself and Wisconsin in the foot, GOP Assembly Speaker Robin Vos should reverse course. Introduce a bare-bones emergency order bill restoring a mask mandate to protect Wisconsinites, save lives and restore federal food aid. Governor Evers would happily sign. Enough political games, lives are at stake. There are also other healthcare realities from the pandemic to face.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

Millions of Americans (thousands of Wisconsinites) lost healthcare coverage during the pandemic and subsequent recession. Fortunately, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was able to help. President Joe Biden reopened enrollment for ACA subsidized private insurance. Well-over 200,000 Americans, including thousands of Wisconsinites, have gained coverage. And, the American Rescue Plan is now making ACA no-cost or affordable private insurance more available to millions of low-income and middle class Americans. The Biden administration is also funding an ad campaign and healthcare navigators to help enrollees. The Wisconsin Stop the COVID Spread coalition could reinforce by alerting Wisconsinites about their new options.

ACA Medicaid expansion also helped to enroll millions in 2020. Moreover, the American Rescue Plan provides a generous financial incentive for the 12 states, including Wisconsin, that never expanded Medicaid. These states are now eligible for a 5 percent boost for their regular Medicaid program for 2 years and a permanent 90 percent federal match for Medicaid expansion. States are listening.

GOP-led Wyoming passed Medicaid expansion in the House. GOP Representative Steve Harshman (former Speaker) after previously opposing 7 times, said: "I've had kind of a change of heart, frankly." Current GOP Speaker Eric Barlow said: "I voted no multiple times on this issue. I'm going to vote yes this time, because I haven't seen any other solution." The bill's narrow loss in a Senate committee vote can't diminish the House vote's historic importance. A harbinger for Wyoming and Wisconsin.

Wisconsin, under GOP Governor Warren Knowles, implemented regular Medicaid early on (1966). Will Vos make Wisconsin the last state to expand Medicaid?

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