

Bill Kaplan: President Biden, help is coming to Wisconsin

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President Joe Biden will participate in a “CNN Presidential Town Hall” in Milwaukee on Tuesday evening. His first official trip since inauguration. CNN said Biden would answer questions about specifics “to contain the coronavirus pandemic and jump-start a troubled economy.” Not a minute too soon.

Despite a successful vaccination campaign under Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers, the pandemic (virus variants) continues. The GOP-led legislature’s foolish effort to end Wisconsin’s mask mandate defied reality. Doctor Bud Chumbley, executive director, Wisconsin Medical Society, said: “We had 600,000 people get COVID in this state and 6,000 died. I’m not sure all those people would think this is the right time to bring up a constitutional question in the middle of a pandemic” Moreover, the CDC just reported that “statewide mask mandates were associated with a reduction in COVID-19 ... hospitalization growth rates”

The economy remains “troubled”. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said unemployment was “close to 10 percent” because of “misclassification” of the unemployed. And, UW-Madison economist Laura Dresser indicated that Wisconsin is a long way from recovering lost jobs. President Biden told reporters: “A lot of people (including) children are going to bed hungry. A lot of families ... are in trouble.”

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The Biden administration is escalating public health actions: mask wearing on federal property and interstate travel-public transportation, using the Defense Production Act to ramp up U.S. production of PPE and vaccines – Wisconsin

Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin has advocated – more testing, steps to assure health equity, guidelines on reopening schools and treatment research.

Biden is also advancing economic-health security and jump-starting the economy. He met with GOP senators, CEO's and congressional Democrats in the Oval Office (with a large picture of FDR). Seeking input, not delay. Congress has approved COVID-19 relief legislation under the budget reconciliation process (no filibuster). Wisconsin congressional Democrats voted yes, state Republicans opposed. Congressional committees will complete drawing up the bill.

The “American Rescue Plan” (ARP) includes help for the 10 million who lost jobs, nearly 8 million additional poor, safe school reopening, healthcare coverage assistance and paid sick-family leave, relief to small businesses, assistance for local-state-tribal governments, public health funding, needed aid for farmers – Wisconsin Democratic Representative Ron Kind has advocated – and help for troubled multiemployer pension plans.

Millions lost healthcare coverage during the pandemic. So the Biden administration has reopened ACA enrollment for private insurance February 15 through May 15, 2021.

Governor Evers said: “Ensuring that every Wisconsinite has affordable, accessible healthcare coverage is critical” The Kaiser Family Foundation estimates that thousands of Wisconsinites could enroll.

Moreover, the ARP will extend fully subsidized ACA private insurance coverage to the poor and unemployed, substantial financial help for middle class enrollment and full federal funding (100 percent) for Medicaid expansion (3 years) for Wisconsin and 11 other states that have previously turned it down. The American Hospital and Medical Associations and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have endorsed these steps.

Needed help is on the way to Wisconsin.

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