

Bill Kaplan: Speaker Vos is disingenuous in opposing Medicaid expansion

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Within nanoseconds, Wisconsin GOP legislative leaders terminated a special legislative session convened to pass Medicaid expansion. Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers had called for the session to “expand BadgerCare (Medicaid) and invest the \$1 billion in cost savings realized under the American Rescue Plan Act into Wisconsin’s economic recovery and more than 50 projects and economic development initiatives across the state.”

However, once again GOP Assembly Speaker Robin Vos defied common sense and math. From the beginning, even before Evers was sworn in, Vos and other GOP legislative leaders have engaged in scorched-earth tactics against Evers. Moreover, even they must be embarrassed that their opposition to Medicaid expansion is disingenuous and illogical. Vos and other GOP leaders have put themselves in an ideological corner. Rather than accepting that circumstances have changed they continue to hold Wisconsin hostage and spout phony explanations.

Cost: Republicans keep shouting that Medicaid expansion will break the bank. Poppycock. By refusing to expand Medicaid the Wisconsin GOP-led legislature will have forfeited \$3.2 billion in federal funds 2014-2023. And, while Wisconsin Medicaid covers childless adults up to 100 percent poverty, not 138 percent as required by Medicaid expansion, it only gets a (temporary) pandemic 66 percent in federal funding through 2021. “By shifting to a Medicaid expansion under the ACA (Affordable Care Act), Wisconsin could increase to the 90 percent (federal) matching rate for about 213,000 childless adults, thereby cutting state costs” (Commonwealth Fund). Wisconsin would save on fiscal aid to hospitals (uncompensated care) and use federal funding for behavioral and mental health.

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Welfare: Vos falsely disparages Medicaid expansion as “massive welfare expansion.” Nonsense. Medicaid is healthcare program covering about 70 million nationally and over 1 million in Wisconsin. This includes middle-working class disabled and elderly in nursing homes and low-income enrollees, most of them working. “When Ohio and Michigan expanded their Medicaid programs to broaden coverage, residents who became eligible found it easier to look for work, according to studies by the Ohio Department of Medicaid and the University of Michigan. That’s because having Medicaid gave them access to primary care doctors and prescription medicine that helped them live normal lives and get jobs” (NYT).

Socialism: Vos engages in ahistorical foolishness – “We won’t let government grow out of control and we won’t let socialism to take root in our state.” Does Vos think the leaders of 18 GOP-led Medicaid expansion states are socialists? Moreover, Medicaid enrollees are seen by private-sector doctors and hospitals. Finally, America’s Health Insurance Plans, the American Hospital and Medical Associations and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce support (fiscal) “incentives for states that have not yet expanded Medicaid”

Only 12 states, including Wisconsin, have not expanded Medicaid. The Marquette Poll shows 70 percent support Medicaid expansion for Wisconsin. It’s long past time for a bipartisan coalition of healthcare and political leaders to come forward to push for Medicaid expansion. There are state Republicans who support Medicaid expansion, mostly privately. Silence is not an option. Real action is needed now.

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