

Evers talks COVID-19 vaccines, bail in year-end interview

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Gov. Tony Evers told WisPolitics.com he would consider offering new incentives to get Wisconsinites vaccinated against COVID-19.

But he said ultimately it will be more effective to appeal to Wisconsinites' desire to help their neighbors as the state pushes to get more residents vaccinated.

Evers likened it to what he saw with neighbors helping each other this fall after a tornado ripped through Boscobel and an SUV plowed through the Waukesha Christmas parade, killing six and injuring dozens of others.

"This is the same thing," Evers said in a year-end interview. "We have people dying because they're not getting a shot. Whatever we can do to call upon that same goodwill that we see when we have significantly difficult situations here in the state of Wisconsin, we're going to call on their good nature."

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Like many places in the country, Wisconsin has seen a spike in COVID-19 cases since the summer. As of Thursday, the seven-day average for new cases was 3,527, down slightly from the peak of 3,848 in early December.

Meanwhile, 58 percent of Wisconsin residents — almost 3.4 million people — had completed the COVID-19 vaccine series as of Friday, according to the Department of Health Services. That trails the 61.7 percent of the U.S. population that had been vaccinated, according to the latest numbers from the CDC.

Evers said the \$100 incentive his administration offered to those who got the vaccine earlier this year produced "OK" results. DHS said 142,000 Wisconsinites received their first dose between Aug. 20 and Sept. 19, the window in which the

incentive was available.

“We can’t give up. We can’t just say the virus has beat us because that’s just not accurate,” Evers said.

The gov also expressed some reservations about President Biden’s COVID-19 mandate that requires vaccinations or regular resting for employees of large companies and health care facilities that receive federal funding. The requirement has been placed on hold by lower courts, and the U.S. Supreme Court will hear oral arguments on Jan. 7 in two cases.

Evers said some of the logistics need to be looked at, including how private employers would administer vaccines and the resources to help them accomplish that.

“The last thing we want to do is dump something on the private sector and say ‘Let’s do it,’” Evers said.

On other issues:

*Evers said he is open to changes in the state’s bail system, calling it “reasonable” to set higher bail for those with a violent history.

The man accused of driving his SUV through the Waukesha Christmas parade had been released 11 days earlier on \$1,000 bail in a separate case. Milwaukee County DA John Chisholm, whose office recommended the \$1,000 bail, has acknowledged it should’ve been higher.

Republican lawmakers have again circulated a constitutional amendment that would allow judges to consider a defendant’s danger to the community when setting bail. Some have talked about other changes as well.

In February 2020, Evers vetoed a bill that would’ve required the Department of Corrections to recommend revoking someone’s extended supervision, parole or probation and send them back to jail if they committed a crime while under court supervision.

Corrections estimated that bill would’ve required the state to build two new prisons with a cost of about \$55 million in the first year the proposal was in effect and \$156 million annually after that.

Evers said any new proposal on bail has to be in the largest context of how the system works.

“Of course it seems reasonable to keep people at a higher bail with a significantly violent background,” Evers said.

*Evers defended his handling of the state’s unemployment insurance system, arguing the work his administration did to provide resources to people in the pandemic is tied to the record-low unemployment Wisconsin saw in November.

The state’s unemployment insurance system was overwhelmed by the crush of calls in the early months of the pandemic, and the Legislative Audit Bureau report last fall found less than 1 in 100 calls to the Department of Workforce Development’s call centers were answered.

For the week of Dec. 12-18, only 30 of the 21,961 calls the agency received had a busy signal, just more than 0.1 percent.

The administration also has begun an \$80 million project to modernize the system using federal funds.

Republicans have argued Evers was slow to address the dramatic uptick in claims at the outset of the pandemic and could’ve moved quicker to update the system. Evers had proposed using state money for the upgrade, but lawmakers rejected that suggestion.

“It would’ve been great if it worked earlier. But we got some major changes to it along the way,” Evers said. “Obviously, our efforts to make our economy strong took people off of unemployment earlier than it would’ve ever happened because they got back to work. We feel very good about that.”

*Along with the delays in processing unemployment claims, Republicans are expected to target Evers in 2022 over his response to the violent protests in Kenosha in the wake of a police officer shooting Jacob Blake on Aug. 23, 2020.

Evers’ office has provided a timeline showing the gov received a request for National Guard troops in the early hours of Aug. 24, and 125 troops were sent later that day. Another 125 were sent the next day as Evers turned down an offer from then-President Trump. That night, Kyle Rittenhouse shot three protesters, killing two. Evers then sent another 250 troops.

Republicans have charged Evers' response was ineffective and his initial comments after the shooting inflamed the situation.

"Here's the deal," Evers said. "They can run any stupid ads they want to on Kenosha. But I did everything that I was asked to do in Kenosha to the T. In situations like this, we partner with local officials, we collaborate with them. They ask us for resources. We give them resources. That's the way it worked there. That's the way it's worked every other place we've been in the state of Wisconsin."

State GOP spokeswoman Anna Kelly knocked Evers for what she called "absent leadership."

"Wisconsin deserves a governor who will deliver solutions, not bad excuses," she said.

*Evers was interviewed before state Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, announced she was dropping out of the race for lieutenant governor. That leaves three Dems officially in the field with state Reps. David Bowen, of Milwaukee, and Sara Rodriguez, of Brookfield, along with Hmong Institute CEO Peng Her, registered to run.

Evers said it's too early to talk about whether he will endorse in the race, adding he expects other candidates to get into the contest for lieutenant governor, and Wauwatosa Mayor Dennis McBride is among those who have been mentioned as possible contenders.

"Obviously, we want somebody that can be acceptable to folks all across the state of Wisconsin, and obviously bring some new ideas to the administration and can be a good partner with me," Evers said when asked what he's looking for in a running mate. "I'm looking forward to having that analysis."

Listen to the [interview](#).