

Ken Brown: With Wisconsinites relying on independent work more than ever, lawmakers must put in place a portable benefits system

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With the pandemic still in full swing, there's no question that this last year has been hard on Wisconsin and the rest of the country. Just this week, new unemployment numbers show that our economy is heading in the wrong direction, with so many in Wisconsin and throughout the country struggling to make ends meet. In this difficult time with so many out of a job, independent, app-based work has been a lifeline as well as a way to help our communities. For me personally, helping my community came in the form of gig work as I decided to drive for Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, and Roadie.

I am thankful for the opportunity to make a steady income through these app-based platforms, especially because the flexible schedule also gives me time to focus on my own small business, my family, and my personal life. There is a downside to choosing gig work, though - the overall lack of a comprehensive benefits system, because our policymakers at the state and federal level have not kept up with the changing economy.

Even though I devote over 28 hours of my week to gig work, like countless other independent workers, I don't have access to important benefits like healthcare, paid sick leave, and workers compensation. This is a scary reality faced by many independent workers who have made their personal vehicles their daily office spaces. If we were to get in a car accident and seriously injure ourselves, there's no telling how high our hospital bill would be without adequate health insurance.

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There have been attempts at the state and federal level to address this issue. In California, bills like AB-5 may have been well-meaning, but were the wrong approach because they would have made all workers full time, and some workers like me do not want to be classified as full-time employees. A bill with similar provisions called the PRO Act was proposed in Congress last year, but could also create problems for independent workers who rely on the gig economy more than ever during the economic downturn. I'm only one example of someone who works for multiple app-based platforms and can't afford to lose that incredible flexibility. Being classified as a full-time employee would threaten my ability to juggle multiple platforms while trying to run my small business.

Our lawmakers have the ability to provide a common sense fix to this widespread problem faced by the gig economy - they can create a portable benefits system. This isn't about creating a nationalized healthcare plan that all Americans would have to be part of, but about making sure that workers in the gig economy are afforded the same opportunities as traditional workers.

A portable benefits system is a modern solution in which benefits would be tied to the employee rather than the traditional model of employer-sponsored benefits. These portable benefits would travel from gig to gig with workers, not leaving them if they decide to add or switch jobs. There are many different ways this could work, including contributions from the employer, consumers, and the federal government.

Portable benefits are a sure way to give workers the coverage we need without threatening our independence. As this new Congress starts their legislative session, it is important that they prioritize portable benefits for gig workers. We need a modern system that aligns with the independent nature of our work and protects our cherished flexibility. I hope that Wisconsin's Senators Tammy Baldwin and Ron Johnson, as well as Rep. Bryan Steil and Rep. Ron Kind will join their colleagues like Senator Mark Warner and Rep. Suzan Delbene in becoming advocates for a portable benefits plan in order to provide the protections that workers deserve.

-Brown is a Racine resident who works for multiple app-based companies.