

Bill Kaplan: Wisconsin GOP obstructs healthcare coverage, ignores math

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COVID-19's horrifying toll: 80.3 million U.S. cases, including about 1.4 million in Wisconsin, almost 1 million deaths nationally, including over 12,800 in Wisconsin. Many infected will have long-term cardiovascular, lung and neurological medical problems. However, it could have been much worse. The Commonwealth Fund reports that nationally vaccinations prevented 66 million more COVID-19 cases, resulted in 17 million fewer hospitalizations, saved 2.2 million lives and \$900 billion in healthcare costs.

This moment underscores the importance of having healthcare coverage, federal payment to struggling hospitals and subsidized vaccination and testing. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) proved its worth, covering nationally a record 14.5 million, including 212,000 Wisconsinites, with low-cost, high quality insurance and about 19 million low-income Americans in 38 states that expanded Medicaid. Altogether, about 80 million Americans are covered by Medicaid.

The Biden administration led the way with an impressive rollout of vaccinations and expansion of healthcare coverage. The American Rescue Plan provided enhanced subsidies for middle-working class Americans to buy ACA private insurance. Moreover, a special enrollment period allowed about 3 million Americans, including over 33,000 Wisconsinites to buy ACA private insurance. Importantly, the White House nearly doubled the regular enrollment period length and increased assistance to sign-up.

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However, Wisconsin Republicans continued to obstruct healthcare coverage expansion. The GOP-led legislature has shot down every attempt by Democratic Governor Tony Evers to expand Medicaid and control COVID-19, forfeiting \$1.6 billion in federal funds over 2 years. It has prevented 90,000 Wisconsinites from being eligible and covered by Medicaid (BadgerCare). The GOP-led legislature is rarely in session, but the legislators all receive healthcare insurance, paid by taxpayers. The moral hypocrisy is stunning, as is the math ignorance, \$3.2 billion in federal Medicaid funding forfeited 2014 – 2023.

But Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson is determined to go lower. In March he emphasized obstructing Biden and going all out to win a GOP-led U.S. Senate. Johnson's main priority—repeal Obamacare (ACA). After state and national blowback, Johnson whined that the media were picking on him. Grow up, Senator Johnson, your wealth allows you Cadillac private insurance. From the beginning Johnson has been clear in opposing the ACA: "It's the greatest single threat to my freedom" The millionaire senator never liked that the ACA was paid for by taxes on the wealthy (earnings over \$250,000 – couples and \$200,000 – individuals as well as taxes on capital gains, dividends and other investment income).

There is more danger on the horizon. The COVID-19 health emergency may end this summer. Under the emergency states received increased federal funding for Medicaid. If the emergency expires the additional federal funding ends and millions will be dropped by Medicaid, including hundreds of thousand of Wisconsinites. Similarly, the enhanced subsidies for ACA private insurance will expire at the end of 2022. Millions, including many Wisconsinites, will be hit with higher premiums.

Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin, a legislative workhorse, is doing her best to resolve these issues. Healthcare coverage is in her DNA – unlike the uncaring showhorse Johnson.

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