

Bill Kaplan: Governor Evers has common sense and a heart

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Wisconsin is fortunate that Governor Tony Evers and his health care team are in charge with the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE). They are newly required by federal law to end continuous Medicaid enrollment. Medicaid enrollees must now apply for renewal to see if they are still eligible. The Medicaid 'unwinding', as required by the end of the PHE, is proceeding across the nation.

The Washington Post reported: "Millions lose their Medicaid coverage." The Kaiser Family Foundation's (KFF) data show about 4 million Medicaid enrollees have been disenrolled. Moreover, between 8 million and 24 million nationally, including between 49,000 and 300,000 Wisconsinites, may lose coverage under different scenarios. Disturbingly, "73% of all people (nationally) disenrolled had their coverage terminated for procedural (not eligibility) reasons" (KFF). They did not complete renewal and may still be eligible.

Medicaid unwinding is proceeding differently in Wisconsin because the Evers administration has common sense and a heart. To sweep Medicaid enrollees off the rolls willy-nilly, as in Florida and Texas, is unconscionable and will add exponentially to medical debt and uncompensated care. People without coverage will still get sick and seek care. Wisconsin has just begun Medicaid unwinding. The MJS reported: "In the first month of Medicaid unwinding, 1 in 3 Wisconsinites due for renewal kept coverage."

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Wisconsin is making substantial efforts to help. State Medicaid Director Jamie Kuhn

said: “We want people who are eligible to participate and stay covered.” Moreover, the Wisconsin Department of Health, Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Insurance and the nonprofit Covering Wisconsin are making a coordinated herculean effort to help Wisconsinites. Covering Wisconsin Director Allison Espeseth said: “This includes figuring out if you may still qualify for Medicaid, have an affordable option available from your job, or could get financial help for (Affordable Care Act private insurance) plans from Healthcare.gov.”

Nationally, the American Hospital Association (AHA), American Medical Association (AMA) and private insurance plans are ringing the alarm. The AMA said: “We must start with improved education and outreach on alternatives to those affected, including the availability of private marketplace plans. We also can simplify renewal processes and eliminate the administrative barriers to retaining Medicaid eligibility, such as burdensome requirements that people return paper forms rather than relying on readily available electronic data and means of verification.”

Governor Evers and his team are listening and acting. However, the Wisconsin Medical Society and Wisconsin Hospital Association need to pitch in. So far, just crickets. Same with Medicaid expansion. The AMA believes that Medicaid unwinding can be ameliorated by expanding Medicaid: “It is also important that the ten states (including Wisconsin) that have not yet expanded Medicaid do so; state lawmakers in North Carolina agreed to an expansion on March 24.”

Wisconsin used to be a health care leader, implementing Medicaid in 1966 (top tier of states) under GOP Governor Warren Knowles. Similarly, GOP Governor Tommy Thompson expanded BadgerCare (Medicaid) eligibility. It's no longer a question of if Wisconsin expands Medicaid, only when. It's inevitable.

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