

# **The Victimization of Wisconsin's Senior Citizens:**

## **Executive Summary**

**Overview:** The risk of COVID-19 to older adults is enormous. In Wisconsin, this risk has been magnified by the failure of the Wisconsin State Legislature to take affirmative action to stem the spread of the virus. The Legislature, under the leadership of Speaker Robin Vos, has met just once in the entire ten months of the pandemic. Just once. In those ten months, 4,432 Wisconsinites over the age of 60 have died. This is 92% of all COVID-19 deaths in our state.

**COVID-19 is Killing Wisconsin Elderly:** COVID-19 is indiscriminate in the age of those infected. In fact, 80% of COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin are among people under the age of 60. But the impact of COVID-19 is much greater among older adults: 78% of those hospitalized with the disease are over age 60 and 92% of deaths are in that age group. The deaths are painful and agonizing – older people alone among busy strangers during the most vulnerable period of life. These deaths were not inevitable. So many lives could have been saved if the State Legislature, under Speaker Vos's leadership, had decided to stand up for Wisconsin's older adults, follow the science about COVID-19, and taken action to protect the state's most vulnerable citizens.

**Speaker Vos's Dereliction of Duty:** Speaker Vos is the most powerful Republican elected official in the State of Wisconsin. He controls when the Legislature convenes and what its members consider. He decided months ago not to take responsibility for taking positive action, instead choosing to keep the Legislature adjourned and file lawsuit after lawsuit to keep Governor Tony Evers and his administration's public health experts from doing their jobs. As a result, a national review found the Wisconsin Legislature, "the least active full-time legislature in the nation since the pandemic."

**The Vos Plan:** After nearly a year of no action, now Speaker Vos has introduced his pandemic plan. It includes: 1) a plan to limit the ability of local officials and local government to address the pandemic; 2) a plan to limit school districts' ability to respond to the pandemic; and 3) a direct attack on the authority of the executive branch of state government by mandating legislative control over both federal pandemic dollars and vaccination priorities and policies. The Vos Plan leaves older adults and the entire State of Wisconsin vulnerable to the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic while serving his own goals of increasing his personal power and diminishing the ability of the executive branch to do its job to protect us.

### **What Wisconsin Needs Now:**

- The Vos Plan stopped in its tracks. It is destructive, punitive, and contrary to what science tells us will stop the pandemic. It is a power grab designed to undercut Governor Evers with no intent to stem the spread of COVID-19 or repair the damage done to Wisconsin residents.
- Vaccine distribution planned and managed by professionals. Now is not the time for amateurs to interfere in the administration of vaccines in our state. We need to abide by what the experts have determined will protect the most vulnerable and do the most to rapidly decrease death and long-term impacts from the pandemic.
- Further efforts to obstruct public health immediately halted. Senior citizens and other groups must organize to stop any proposal that undermines public health. As voters and taxpayers, we cannot let Speaker Vos and his supporters waste time and money on lawsuits that enable COVID-19 to continue its destruction. If this requires replacing leaders who prioritize power over public health, we look forward to 2022.

# **The Victimization of Wisconsin's Senior Citizens: A Critical Analysis of the Impact of Speaker Robin Vos's Inaction on COVID-19**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Older people living in Wisconsin face multiple dangers from the COVID-19 pandemic that has swept the country in 2020. These include illness, food insecurity, economic crises, and mental anguish due to prolonged isolation. They also are dying from COVID-19 at an alarming and heartbreaking rate.

None of this is natural or necessary. In many states, leaders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with policies that protected and supported senior citizens. However, state policy decisions by the Speaker of the Wisconsin State Assembly, Robin Vos, created an environment where senior citizens have been at-risk with no help for almost a year.

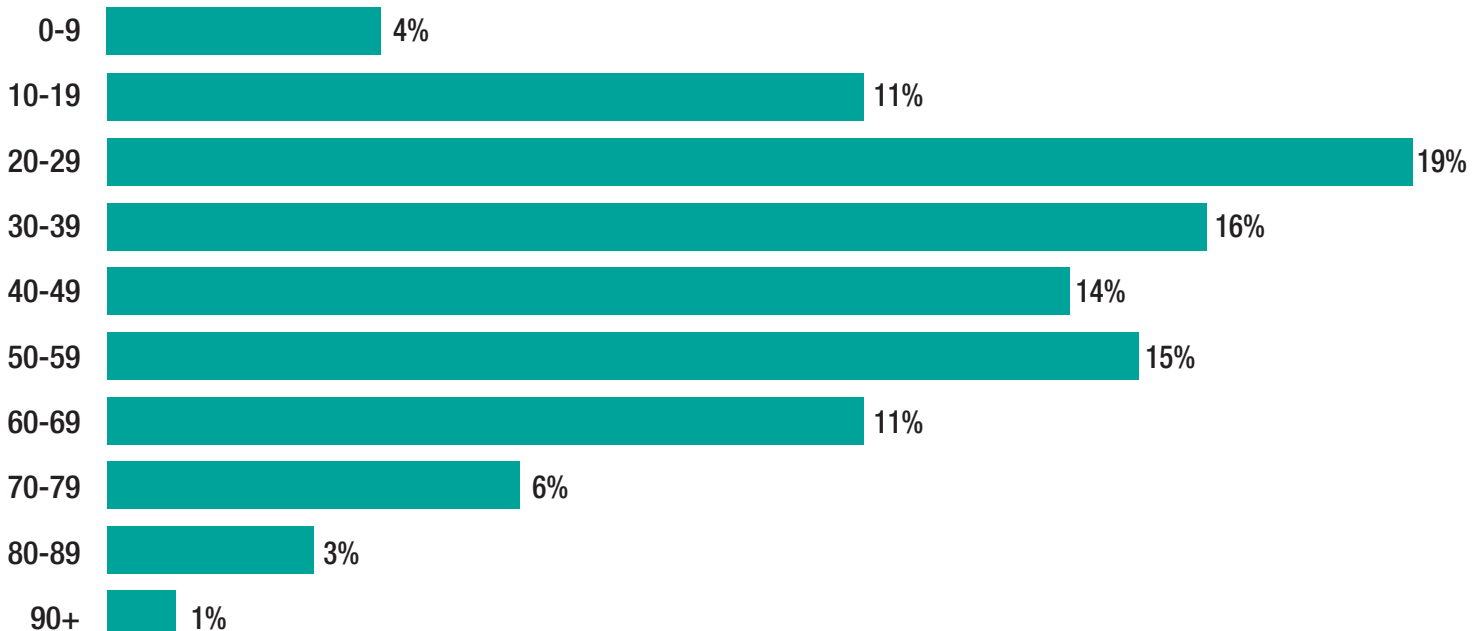
Vos has now proposed to take control over federal aid to Wisconsin and the vaccine distribution. Given his abject failure to confront the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it is imperative that his bid for power over funding and medical care in 2021 be stopped. Senior citizens cannot survive more legislative indifference.

## **COVID-19 IS KILLING OUR WISCONSIN ELDERLY**

COVID-19 has proven to be indiscriminate in the age of those infected. In fact, 80% of COVID-19 cases are among people under the age of 60 years. (WI Department of Health, 12/30/2020)

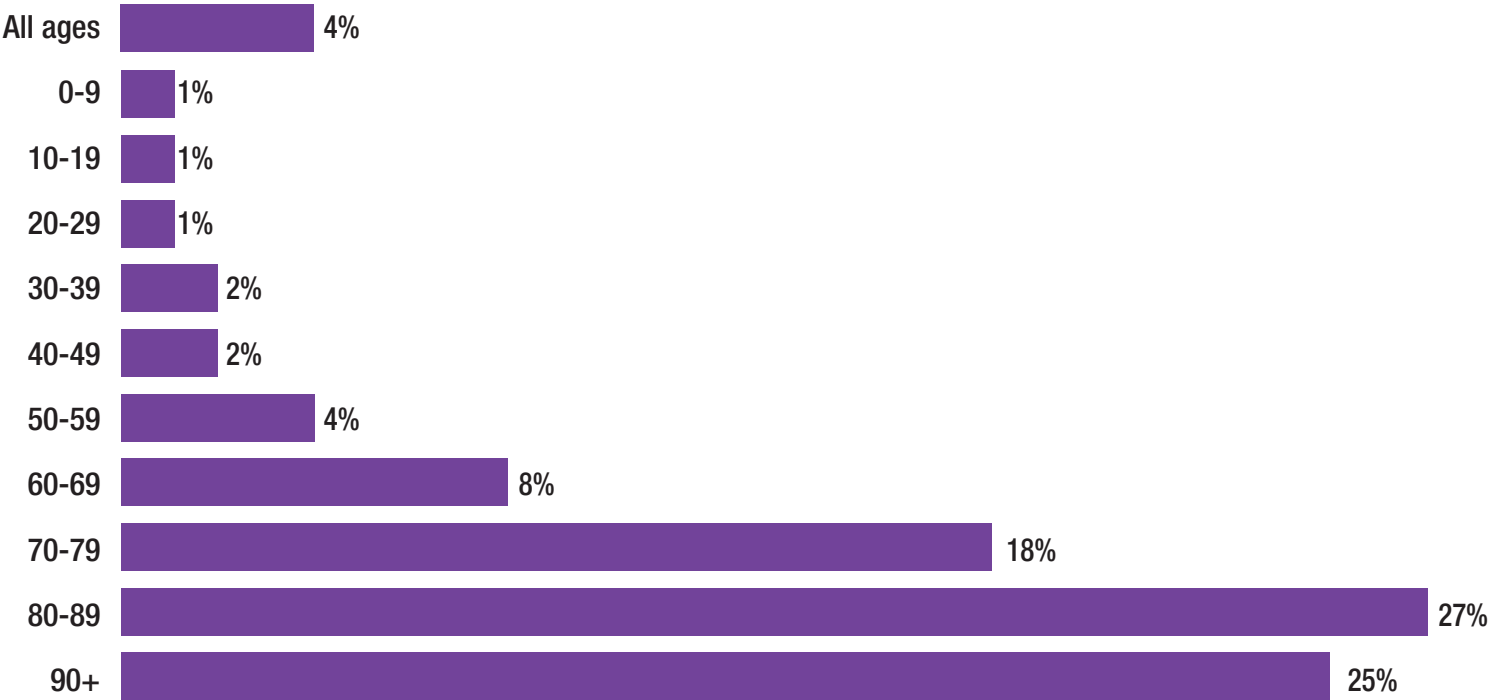
### **Percent of confirmed COVID-19 cases by age group Updated as of 1/2/2021 (Total: 484,085)**

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/cases.htm>



However, the impact of the COVID-19 virus is much more severe among people over 60 years old. In fact, 78% of those hospitalized with COVID-19 are over the age of 60. An astonishing 14,074 older adults have been hospitalized because the effects of COVID-19 made it impossible to manage the illness at home.

**Percent of COVID-19 cases resulting in hospitalization within age group**  
**Updated as of 1/2/2021 (Total: 21,449)**



Age Range	Total Cases	Hospitalized Cases	Percent of Total
0-9	18,864	186	1%
10-19	54,588	346	1%
20-29	92,705	1,031	1%
30-39	75,672	1,255	2%
40-49	68,979	1,548	2%
50-59	74,056	2,900	4%
60-69	52,729	4,283	8%
70-79	27,662	4,875	18%
80-89	13,581	3,688	27%
90+	5,249	1,337	25%
Total	484,085	21,449	4%

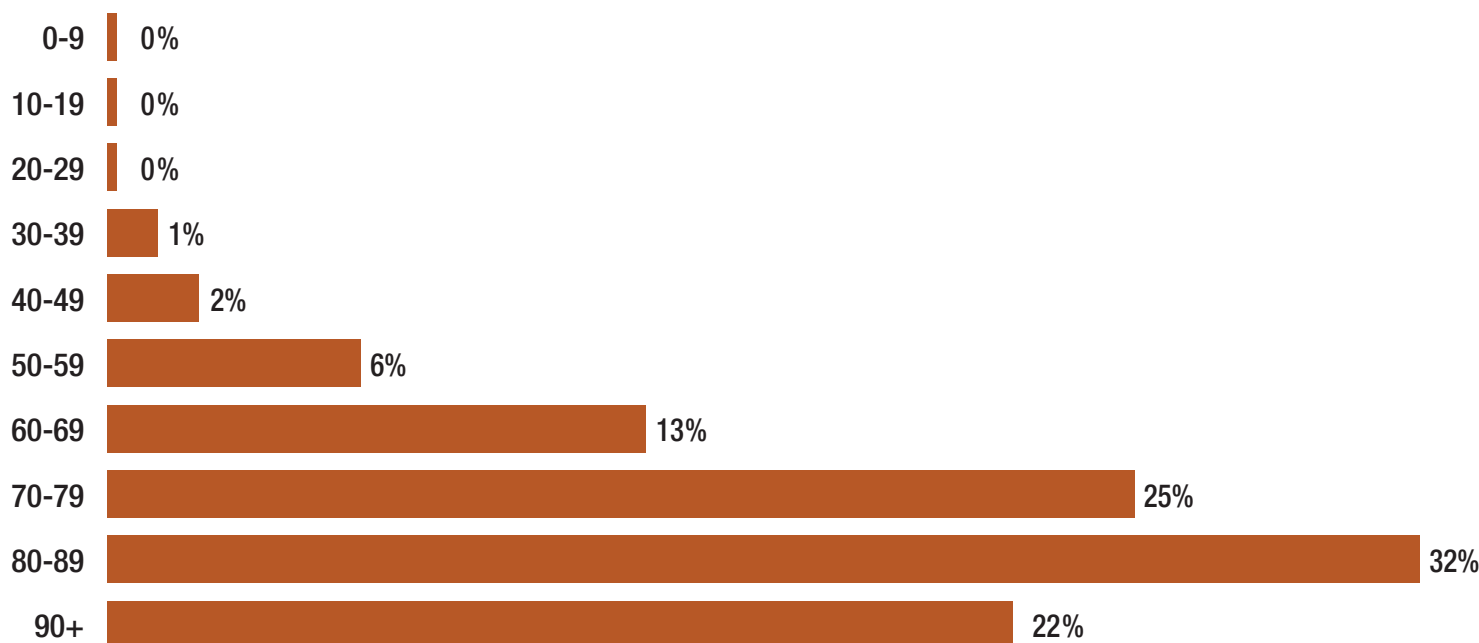


Most alarming is the extraordinarily high COVID-19 death rate among those over 60. When we look at who dies from this terrible disease, the answer is primarily older adults. In fact, 92% of COVID-19 deaths have occurred among people over the age of 60 – 4,432 people as of January 2, 2021.

### Percent of COVID-19 deaths by age group

Updated as of 1/2/2021 (Total: 4,870)

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/deaths.htm>



The lethal effects of COVID-19 on senior citizens are compounded by the necessity of medical isolation. This leaves older people and their families separated during the painful illness and agonizing death -- old people alone among busy strangers during the most vulnerable period of life.

Severe illness and death are not the only consequences of the ongoing pandemic. The ripple effects of COVID-19 are long term and dangerous. There are 1.3 million people over 60 years of age in Wisconsin:

- Almost one in three lives alone
- 40% live on less than \$25,000 a year
- About one out of three has a disability
- Over 80% have a chronic health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, or high blood pressure (*Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Demographics of Aging in Wisconsin*)

Many Wisconsin seniors live on fixed incomes, have limited transport options and their medical conditions require a specialized diet. Given these circumstances, the pandemic has resulted in several serious problems.

**Food insecurity:** Meal programs have closed, food pantries have closed, there are fewer volunteers to deliver food and many seniors are afraid to go to the store, if they have a way to get there. Almost one in ten seniors interviewed by the Brookings Institute cited food insecurity as a serious problem. The average amount of federal food assistance provided to elderly persons is \$16. (*Annelies Goger, "For millions of low-income seniors, coronavirus is a food-security issue," Brookings Institute, March 16, 2020*)

**Economic crises:** The main economic shortfalls facing seniors are:

1. **Loss of Income (for those still working) During the pandemic, about 11 percent of people 65 and older, or about 1.1 million people, have lost their jobs.**

*(Commonwealth Fund: COVID-19's Impact on Older Workers: Employment, Income, and Medicare Spending, by Jacobson, Feder and Radley October 6, 2020)*

2. **Inability to pay mortgage or rent**

<https://www.ncoa.org/COVID-19/potential-financial-impacts-of-COVID-19>. "Among older adults, lower-income households of color face especially difficult challenges. For instance, almost a quarter of lower-income, Black and Hispanic older adult households have little or no confidence that they will be able to make their next rent or mortgage payment." (*Making Rent in the Pandemic, How are Older Adults Faring; S. Scheckler, Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, 8/5/2020*)

**Social isolation:** Loneliness is a serious risk to senior citizens. The elderly deal with isolation in normal life but it is offset by senior centers, meal programs, volunteering, church events, shopping, visits from family and friends. All that has been eliminated by COVID-19 prevention rules. "Research has linked social isolation and loneliness to higher risks for a variety of physical and mental conditions: high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, a weakened immune system, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease, and even death." (*"Social isolation, loneliness in older people pose health risks," National Institute on Aging, April 23, 2019*)

## **SPEAKER VOS'S DERELECTION OF DUTY**

Robin Vos is the Speaker of the Wisconsin State Assembly. He is personally responsible for the State Assembly's failure to take legislative action to protect Wisconsin and its citizens from the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on Wisconsin Dept of Health Services, as of January 2, there have been 4,870 reported COVID-19 deaths in Wisconsin and 484,085 confirmed COVID-19 cases since Speaker Vos shut down the Wisconsin State Assembly. We have lost the entire population of communities the size of Columbus or Bristol or North Fond du Lac or Rothchild or Saukville or Summit, Wisconsin - gone, wiped off the map.

This huge number of deaths is but the tip of the iceberg of hundreds of thousands of people whose lives and families, schools and businesses have been destroyed or forever changed by the pandemic. We are nowhere near the end of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 and are only beginning to have some idea of the long-term effects on everything we do as individuals, as communities, as schools, and businesses for years to come.



**Power of the Speaker of the State Assembly:** The Speaker of the Wisconsin State Assembly is the de facto leader of the Assembly's majority party, in this case, the Republican Party. The Speaker holds power over everything that the State Assembly does or does not do. The Speaker makes all committee assignments and supervises all officers of the Assembly. The Speaker decides which bills make it to committee and which bills go before the full assembly for debate and final vote.

Robin Vos was first elected Speaker on January 7, 2013 and is currently serving his fourth term. Vos is, by most measures, the highest ranking and most powerful Republican elected official in the state. He understands better than anyone how to enact legislation and how to obstruct it. He has the power to facilitate, negotiate, legislate solutions, or block all forward motion. Vos decides the 'what, when, why, how, and who' of every legislative proposal that goes before the State Assembly. Because of Speaker Vos's unique position and the tremendous amount of power he wields, his action or inaction has profound ripple effects for the people of Wisconsin.

**Speaker Vos's Response to Pandemic:** In late March 2020, Wisconsin recorded the first COVID-19 death. Public health and local elected officials, as well as citizens throughout Wisconsin, looked for state-wide leadership, guidance, and resources to prepare and protect us from the COVID-19 pandemic.

What did Speaker Vos, Speaker of the State Assembly, leader of the Republican controlled state legislature, do during these crucial early months of the pandemic? Speaker Vos did two things: 1) He adjourned the State Assembly without proposing or passing any meaningful legislation to protect the public and the state's economy from the ravages of the highly contagious deadly COVID-19 virus; and 2) He began a concerted effort to block any and all efforts by Governor Evers to prevent the spread of COVID-19 throughout Wisconsin.

**Vos Abandons the Ship-of-State at the First Signs of the COVID-19 Storm:** While other State Legislatures correctly perceived the enormous crisis posed by the pandemic, our State Legislature went on a Vos-mandated vacation. Since April 2020, members of the Wisconsin State Assembly have checked out on their responsibilities to the public, following the example of their leader, Speaker Vos.

From Wispolitics.com, "The Wisconsin Legislature has been the least active full-time state legislative body in the country since states began taking measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. In the other nine states with full-time legislatures, as defined by the National Conference of State Legislatures, lawmakers on average have met 18 times more frequently than their Wisconsin counterparts since Gov. Tony Evers first declared a public health emergency on March 12." (*Wispolitics.com, "Review finds least active full-time legislature in nation since pandemic," October 6, 2020*)

**Speaker Vos continued to collect his \$53,000 annual salary despite the legislative shut down.**

**Vos Prevents State Initiatives to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19:** Although Speaker Vos has done nothing legislatively since spring to deal with the pandemic, he has actively undercut the efforts of state and local government to protect the public. Speaker Vos has fought obsessively to assume power to define and implement public health protocols, to decide whether to reopen schools, to secure federal funding, and to allocate resources to various public health programs. Speaker Vos has insisted that no one can do anything related to safeguarding the public health without his permission. Critically, and with a direct impact on the number of cases and deaths in our state, Vos blocked the safety guidelines issued by elected officials and public health officers during the crucial first few months of the pandemic, when public health protocols could have stemmed the spread of COVID-19 virus.

Speaker Vos has obstructed and is continuing to obstruct any attempt – at any level of government - to protect people from COVID-19 and support Wisconsin families.

Speaker Vos refused to reconvene the State Assembly to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Vos mocked the Governor's call for special legislative sessions.
- Speaker Vos and Republican leaders in the State Assembly repeatedly sued the Governor in State Court to stop public health officials from implementing basic COVID-19 protocols: wearing face masks, maintaining safe physical distancing, limiting travel, safe-at-home practices:
- Wisconsin Republicans sued governor over stay-at-home order.  
*(Milwaukee Journal Sentinel; Meg Jones and Molly Beck, 4/21,2020)*
- GOP leaders went to court to strike down Tony Evers's mask mandate.  
*(Milwaukee Journal Sentinel; Meg Jones and Molly Beck, 10/8/2020)*
- Speaker Vos denied local elected and public health officials the right to implement their own public health protocols. *(Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)*

**Vos Accepts Federal Aid for his Business but Blocks Workers' Compensation:** According to numerous news reports, Speaker Vos received up to \$350,000 of federal COVID-19 relief funds for his personal popcorn business.

- “Three days before he convened the Assembly to pass what would be its only bill in the three months since the coronavirus pandemic hit Wisconsin, Assembly Speaker Vos, R-Rochester, received from \$150,00 to \$350,000 in federal coronavirus relief funds for his popcorn company.” *(AP Reports, upnorthnewswi.com, July 9, 2020)*
- The approval came three days before the Assembly passed the state's coronavirus relief bill, which included a last-minute provision from Speaker Vos that made it harder for essential workers to get worker's compensation from their employer during the pandemic. *(“Assembly meets, in person and virtually, and passes legislation to help the unemployed, capture federal medical dollars,” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, April 14, 2020)*
- “Vos has frequently railed against government assistance programs, going so far as to say last year that Democratic Gov. Tony Evers is “intent on trapping people on welfare.” *(“Assembly Speaker, who rails against government assistance, took at least \$150,000 for his company,” upnorthnewswi.com, July 6, 2020)*

## **SPEAKER VOS'S DECEMBER SURPRISE: The Vos Plan**

Between April and mid-December, Speaker Vos adjourned the Legislature and refused to call it back into session to address pressing issues related to the pandemic. He then used his time and resources to block Governor Evers' efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19 and challenged local health departments' efforts to protect citizens. Now, he has come up with the Vos Plan – a set of proposals to take control of federal assistance funds, override local health officials, regulate public school districts, and subvert the structure of state government by lodging executive power in the State Assembly.

Here are the details:

1. The Vos Plan would limit the ability of local officials and local government to address the pandemic:

- The proposal would prohibit local health orders that set crowd capacity restrictions for higher-risk types of businesses. Instead, any local capacity restrictions would have to apply to all types of businesses regardless of their risk profile.
- Local health officers would only be able to set capacity restrictions for two weeks. After that it would take an act by the County Board to set capacity limits, and even those limits would require renewal every two weeks.
- Local health officials would not be able to prohibit public gatherings in churches. Oddly, the proposal seems to exempt both religious and non-religious gatherings from restrictions so long as they are conducted in a church. The proposal does not seem to include a similar exemption for other religious buildings like synagogues or mosques.
- Employers (such as nursing homes) would not be able to require that employees get a COVID-19 vaccine as a condition of employment, although employers currently can require their employees get a flu shot or other vaccinations.

2. The Vos Plan would limit school districts' ability to respond to the pandemic:

- The proposal would require public schools to provide in-person instruction unless a super-majority of the school board approves online instruction. Even then, the approval would only be good for two weeks, at which point at least two-thirds of board members would have to re-approve online instruction for another two weeks.
- If districts do provide virtual instruction, teachers must do online teaching from an actual school building, though this provides no meaningful difference in quality of instruction.
- School districts that provide virtual instruction would have their budgets cut. It seems that some of the biggest school districts in Wisconsin, including Milwaukee, Madison, and Green Bay, have already triggered this potential budget cut. Those three districts would lose \$44 million combined from their budgets. Also, this budget cut would impact students of color, who are concentrated in Wisconsin's largest urban districts. The Milwaukee, Madison, and Green Bay districts together serve 58% of the Black students in Wisconsin, compared to 5% of the white students. Budget cuts would make it harder for these districts to provide students the excellent education that every child in Wisconsin deserves.



### 3. The Vos Plan directly attacks the authority of the executive branch of state government:

- The Vos Plan would undercut the Governor's ability to spend federal COVID-19 aid money. This grossly elevates the role of the legislature's budget committee, essentially establishing the committee as the administrator of state government, a role already occupied by the Governor.
- The Vos Plan would require that the Legislature's budget committee sign off on the governor's plan to distribute the vaccine. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Wisconsin State Disaster Medical Advisory Committee, Vaccine Distribution Subcommittee, a body of physicians, scientists, and public health officials appointed by the Governor, has already issued vaccine guidance (*P-02860 dated 12/2020*). The Vos Plan would replace these experts with politicians, including many who are very vocal anti-vax advocates.
- There are a few positive measures included in this proposal. The proposal extends an earlier measure that allows people to get early refills on their prescription drugs during the pandemic. It also continues an earlier provision that limits the ability of health insurance plans to charge out-of-network fees for COVID-19 treatment.

## PROTECTING OUR PEOPLE AND OUR DEMOCRACY

It is imperative that the voters in Wisconsin stop the Vos Plan. This is a matter of life and death, not just for seniors but for all people in our state. It is a matter of health policy, a matter of economic and social security, and a matter of good government. The facts speak for themselves:

- COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc in our communities – people are dying, hospitals are full, businesses are closing, children are unable to receive a normal education and thousands of people are broke, hungry and on the brink of losing their homes.
- The most powerful legislator in the state has refused to help lead the state through this crisis and has worked hard to prevent the Governor from protecting the state's people and communities.
- Speaker Vos has worked primarily to protect businesses like his own from regulations, liability, or responsibility to protect their employees.
- Speaker Vos has also proved to be supportive of the anti-vaccine movement in Wisconsin.
- Speaker Vos has shown himself to be opposed to local decision-making or to have basic respect for the three branches of government working together for the good of the people. He has been, on many occasions, skeptical of the democratic process and focused on securing power for himself.



Given the history of his indifference to the welfare of our families and our communities, it is critical that he is not allowed to push through his new proposal. After a year of turmoil and loss, Wisconsin voters have had enough. We, as residents of Wisconsin, have the right and the responsibility to define what is needed to rebuild our lives and our economy.

Older adults have suffered so much from Speaker Vos's indifference, but so have Wisconsinites of all ages. The impacts on people's health, financial well-being, family relationships, and civic involvement have been enormous. We have suffered long enough.

## **What Wisconsin needs now are these three things:**

- The Vos Plan stopped in its tracks. It is destructive, punitive, and contrary to what science tells us will end the pandemic. It is a power grab designed to undercut Governor Evers with no intent to stem the spread of COVID-19 or repair the damage done to Wisconsin residents.
- Vaccine distribution planned and managed by professionals. Now is not the time for amateurs to interfere in the administration of vaccines in our state. We need to abide by what the experts have determined will protect the most vulnerable. Our prime goal is what is needed to rapidly decrease death and long-term impacts from the pandemic.
- Senior Citizens and other groups must organize to stop any proposal that undermines public health. As voters and taxpayers, we cannot let Speaker Vos and his supporters waste time and money on lawsuits and posturing that enables COVID to continue its destruction. If this requires replacing leaders who prioritize power over public health, we look forward to 2022.

