

# Gov. Tony Evers signs Wisconsin coronavirus relief bill, though there is criticism of how it treats first responders

[Patrick Marley and Molly Beck](#), Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 7:00 a.m. CT April 15, 2020 | Updated 5:12 p.m. CT April 15, 2020

MADISON - Gov. Tony Evers signed a sweeping coronavirus relief package Wednesday after lawmakers approved it with just two days to spare before the state would have lost out on hundreds of millions of dollars in federal help.

The Democratic governor signed the bill, which also suspends a one-week waiting period to receive unemployment benefits, two hours after state senators unanimously approved it.

The overall measure was championed by both parties despite a cloud of criticism over a last-minute amendment from Republicans that scaled back their original plan to offer more worker's compensation protection for first responders.

Evers called the legislation a step forward, but short of what the state needs. He called on lawmakers to provide hazard pay to health care and child care workers as well as assistance to farmers and shuttered businesses.

"This bill is finally a step in the right direction, but there is much more work to be done," he said in a statement.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald called the decisions lawmakers have to make "gut-wrenching" and said they may do more to respond to the virus.

"This bill isn't perfect and it might be the first bill of a number that we are going to have to pass in the Legislature," the Juneau Republican said. "But it is timely and I think it's been well thought out, and I think it will help."

The bill passed the Assembly 97-2 on Tuesday and the Senate 31-0 on Wednesday. Democratic Sen. Lena Taylor of Milwaukee didn't cast a vote on the bill after complaining that she wasn't allowed to speak during Wednesday's session.

Republicans in the Assembly on Tuesday weakened the bill's workers' compensation protections for first responders who become infected. That prompted outrage from groups representing police officers and firefighters.

Instead of making workers' compensation benefits available to all health care workers, the amended legislation will provide them only to police officers, firefighters and health care

workers who treat people with coronavirus if they can prove they were exposed to the illness while working on a person diagnosed with the virus.

Union officials who represent police and firefighters say the bill's bar for workers' compensation is too high to meet to cover all affected workers who are risking their lives to do their jobs.

"The law will presume that a first responder's COVID-19 injuries are caused by their employment as long as they can prove it," Jim Palmer, executive director of the Wisconsin Professional Police Association, tweeted. "Thanks for nothing."

But Republicans who control the Legislature say the measure limits costs for taxpayers, who are already suffering under the economic downturn.

"It does address first responders, but not in a manner that meets the expectation of unions," Mike Mikalsen, spokesman for Republican Sen. Steve Nass, tweeted to Palmer late Tuesday. "There are families out there paying taxes but have already lost jobs or watching a lifetime of building a business get destroyed in just weeks. A little perspective please!"

While Assembly Democrats criticized the measure, none in the Senate mentioned it.

Democratic Attorney General Josh Kaul, who oversees the state's Department of Justice and sets standards for law enforcement officers, raised concerns about the provision.

"We should be doing more to support these essential workers than simply ensuring that they're able to receive workers' compensation benefits if they contract COVID-19," he said in a statement. "But, because of an amendment that gutted a protection for first responders that originally had been included in the coronavirus bill, the legislation that passed the state Legislature doesn't even do that."

## **Timeline left no room for changes**

Lawmakers waited until the last week they could to pass legislation to take advantage of federal aid to help pay for the skyrocketing costs state governments are facing as thousands become sick and unemployed.

Until this week, Wisconsin had been in a minority of states that hadn't yet passed measures related to the coronavirus pandemic.

Republican leaders waited until April 1 to begin writing legislation, according to drafting records related to the relief package — a month after the virus began to spread in Wisconsin and a week and a half after the governor first proposed a bill to legislative leaders.

The bill wasn't released until Monday and taken up Tuesday by the Assembly. With a Friday deadline for Evers' signature, lawmakers gave themselves no time to make any changes.

Unlike Evers' proposal, the bill passed this week doesn't spend any state money. Republican lawmakers said Evers' plan was too costly and the state could rely on about \$2 billion in federal help to respond to the pandemic.

Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling said the Legislature should be doing more, including providing assistance to hospitals facing rising caseloads and businesses that have closed because of coronavirus.

“Many in the majority party continue to downplay the significance of this crisis,” the La Crosse Democrat said. “It is disappointing that the plan before us today is limited in scope.”

This week's sessions were the first the Legislature has held virtually. Shilling and Senate President Roger Roth, R-Appleton, were in one room of the Capitol, with the other 31 senators videoconferencing into the session from other parts of the Capitol or their homes.

Roth said after the session that the computer equipment should be kept in the room he and Shilling used in case another virtual session is held.

The bill approved Wednesday suspends the one-week waiting period before people who are out of work may collect unemployment benefits. It also allows the state to receive an extra \$150 million for health care programs for every fiscal quarter that the pandemic persists.

The new law also provides insurance protection for those infected with coronavirus and shields health care providers from liability.

To help keep down people's insurance medical costs, the law bars insurers from charging people more to get treatment for coronavirus when they go to out-of-network providers. It also prohibits insurers from discriminating against people based on whether they have had coronavirus.

All insurers will be required to cover coronavirus testing for free.

The law also suspends accountability requirements for public and private schools for the current school year.