http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/business-small-open-s5.jpg



Sen. Smith writes about the work to help communities across the state recover from the pandemic and build our state up for success. He shares an example from Jackson County to support childcare providers, working parents and local employers.

MADISON - The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our lives in more ways than one. I think many of us, myself included, expected to pick up right where we left off, but it's now very clear there's a lot we need to do to help recover from the pandemic and address the challenges that existed long before this crisis.

In March, President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) into law, which directed relief to working families and small businesses. ARPA also included emergency funding for states and local governments to respond to the pandemic.

So, how should this relief be distributed to help our communities recover? How can our local municipalities best allocate these dollars to help Wisconsin move forward? These questions are currently being asked and studied throughout the country. Local leaders have formed committees and created websites in search of ideas that match the needs of their communities. There are opportunities for you, as citizens, to add your input to the mix.

And your input really can make a difference. In Jackson County, right here in western

Wisconsin, the County Board listened to the needs of its residents and agreed to direct $105,500 toward improving childcare access. Marianne Torkelson, who leads the Jackson County Childcare Taskforce said, “These dollars will go directly to providers in Jackson County for retention bonuses and for new providers to help with start-up costs.”

The pandemic directly hit the childcare industry which, in turn, negatively affected businesses and the local economy. When parents lack reliable childcare, they’re less likely to be at work, putting a burden on their employer. Like many essential services, childcare access has often been overlooked and providers have been taken for granted. Even before the pandemic, many employers were concerned by the lack of childcare options. The Jackson County Childcare Taskforce was formed without knowing it would have such an important role in pandemic recovery efforts. Now it’s become abundantly clear that if businesses are to be successful, access to affordable and reliable childcare is essential.

Of course, other essential needs must also be met and the ARPA funding is vital in the success of our recovery efforts. Thus, decisions made now by elected officials will have a lasting effect on all aspects of our economic recovery.

If any municipality is going to help the community recover, they must prioritize the projects that have the greatest impact for all of its residents. Maybe it’s partnering with Internet Service Providers to lay fiber to every household and business. It could be using ARPA funds to improve aging and inadequate infrastructure or boost our Main Street businesses. Or, like Jackson County, elected officials can ensure essential workers, like childcare providers are paid properly and parents can hold a family supporting job.



Before 2020 I’m not sure everyone recognized essential workers’ invaluable role in our lives. I doubt people thought twice of the work performed by a custodian, grocery store clerk, warehouse worker or childcare provider. Only when we missed them or saw that they worked right through the pandemic did it become more obvious how *essential* essential service workers really are in our lives.

Essential workers’ service was undervalued and unappreciated before the pandemic, and made worse by it. Many workers have been reluctant to return to the same job for the same pay

now that they know how much their work is really worth. Some have made life changes like retraining for new jobs they hope will better support their family. Childcare, along with long term care services, are perfect examples of jobs that have become increasingly hard to fill. Employers, working with community stakeholders and local elected officials, have gotten creative to attract and retain workers; the Jackson County childcare initiative is one example, and I hope there'll be more.

I applaud local elected officials, like the leaders in Jackson County that are making these decisions for the recovery and advancement of the community. That is what real leaders do; they solve problems and look to the future with their solutions. We will recover and build back better with leaders that make wise investments.