Wisconsin Alliance for Retired Americans

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Interview with Representative Francesca Hong, candidate for Wisconsin Governor
July 17, 2026

Kristin Brey: Hello, I'm Kristin Brey, and I'm pleased to welcome you to the Wisconsin Alliance for Retired Americans 2026 Gubernatorial Interview Series. Wisconsin has a rapidly growing older population. Today, one in five Wisconsinites are over 65, but in the next four years, that's going to grow to one in four. So the decisions our next governor makes will have a significant impact on the health, financial security, and ability to live independently. This interview series gives voters an opportunity to hear directly from the candidates about how they would address the challenges facing older Wisconsinites. Each candidate has been invited to participate under the same format and will be asked the same core questions. It is now my pleasure to introduce my co-interviewer, Carolyn Kaiser, who is the vice president of the Wisconsin Alliance for Retired Americans. Carolyn, I'll hand it over to you.

Carolyn Kaiser: I'm Carolyn Kaiser, vice president of the Wisconsin Alliance for Retired Americans, and I'm a resident of a rural county. And I'd like to say thank you, Francesca, for coming.

Francesca Hong: Happy to be here.

Kristin Brey: Absolutely. All right. So the first big one is access to health care. So as we know, Wisconsin's population, as I just said, is graying very, very quickly. There's going to be 1.3 million plus residents that are 65 or older by 2030. But at the same time, we know hospitals are closing, especially in rural areas. So as governor, what would you actually do to keep Wisconsin's financial, financially afloat so that older adults and everyone else can still get emergency care, inpatient treatment and basic health services without having to drive an hour or more to find it?

Francesca Hong: No one should have to drive an hour or more to find access to high-quality, affordable health care. And here in Wisconsin, we've seen the lack of oversight and accountability in taking on some of the corporate corruption that occurs within hospitals when they are consolidating. I think we can increase regulation there to discourage hospitals from doing so. We must also invest heavily in rural health initiatives, and I think making sure that when we have local governments that are orally funded by the state and shared revenue. We can make investments in rural roads and make sure that whether it's ambulance services or other medical transit, services are not interrupted so that people have access to good, high-quality health care.

We also have to invest in our workforce, and I think that piece on being financially forward, making sure that the taxpayer dollars are being stewarded towards the essential services that our rural communities and all of our older communities need have to come and bear our taxes, looking at where we can make responsible cuts in corporate subsidies where we are not seeing that investment coming back into communities, including in non-profit and for-profit hospitals. And then looking at increasing new revenue streams, whether that comes from legalizing cannabis to looking at ways to have a fair tax system and lowering property taxes for a lot of our communities right now that are facing potential referenda and increased property taxes by funding public schools. So with any fiscal management of the state, you're looking at new sources of revenue, cutting existing revenue that may not be properly invested into communities, and sometimes that is going to require cuts, but I believe prioritizing the cuts that are going into tax breaks that aren't being reinvested back into communities will ensure that we have a more sustainable, stable economy.

Carolyn Kaiser: I'd like to ask a question about transportation. And as we get older, the inability to drive becomes more often than we would like to admit. When that happens, We have a difficult time at getting to a doctor's appointment, going to the grocery store, just basic things that people think are a given. They're not a given. So I would actually like to know what your plan would be to, what do you see as transportation options?

Francesca Hong: Yeah, so. I'm trying to make shared revenue, the funding that goes from our state government into our local governments, I'm trying to make shared revenue sexy again. And for too long, we've seen our local governments really hollowed out in terms of the funds that they get back from the state in an equitable manner so that the local governments, who know better the services that are most needed in their communities, are able to fund those. And some of those things that they have to cut when the state isn't paying their fair share is in public transportation. And we're seeing really tough budget decisions have to be made around public transportation. So when we actually give our local governments the funding that they need to put into public transportation, we won't see as many program cuts. I talked before about, you know, there are some initiatives when it comes to rural roads specifically and making sure we're maintaining rural roads. There's not enough of that funding that's going to smaller communities and they're getting harder to access.

You have to, the type of information that local governments are having to try to access when smaller communities may not always have the big staff at local government levels, right? How can we make these programs that are available easier to access so it's not just the big cities getting the most amount for some of these rural, for some of these Rd. initiatives? And local programs where we see rideshare or being able to even invest in safer streets, these are where we want to see the state pay their fair share, which is why I would like to see a new school more equitable and fix the shared revenue formula, not just put more money into it, but make sure that moving forward, this is a funding formula that makes sure that whether you're in a rural, urban, or suburban area, your local government is getting the fair share. share so that the localized programs that are funded by your city or town don't have to get cut, or you can look to actually expand and scale them.

Carolyn Kaiser: As a past town board member, I know how difficult it is to try to keep your roads straight. That is our budget in the township. And so the step really is, you know, when the state mandates certain things, are we looking at taking money out so that it's not in our burden? As local government, if the state mandates you need XYZ, but don't give the funding to the local government, it's way out of whack.

Francesca Hong: Yes, unfunded mandates are... that's one of the lines that I have for whether or not I'm going to support a piece of legislation. Because it's one thing to have a law, it's another to be able to actually enforce and implement the law. If you're not going to fund it, but you're going to put the burden on local government, it's probably not a statute that we should have had or that we take seriously enough to make happen. And there's a lot of state preemptions that prevent local governments from actually having the local control, including around ordinances for housing for road maintenance.

I think it's about time that we have the state give not only their fair share of revenue to local government, but that we actually implement local control again, and that when we are writing our values into laws, the legislature does. And there's a great opportunity to do this now, especially if we have a democratic trifecta, that it's one thing to have the law. We need to make sure that we're thinking about the functionality of it and giving our local governments the resources to actually implement it or access it and navigate it, which that comes with funding our state agencies to give you the guidance in knowing, hey, this program is here, here's actually how to use it, because working class folks, local governments included, making those things harder to access is, that's not an inefficient, that's an inefficient use of our state funds if it's there, but people don't know how to get it.

Carolyn Kaiser: Thank you.

Kristin Brey: So you already touched on this a little bit, but obviously we also have a shortage of healthcare workers, whether it's nursing assistants, nurses, in-home health aides. So what do you feel like in the governor role you could do to encourage a stronger workforce in healthcare?

Francesca Hong: I had an opportunity to tour Northwestern Technical College, and our tech colleges have amazing programs where these are the jobs that we really need right now are in technicians and CNAs and in healthcare, and yet They're not able to offer as many courses as they can or scholarships when there isn't that public funding going into our public colleges where this is where we can build and improve and strengthen our healthcare workforce right here in Wisconsin. And so increasing that funding for our public colleges and encouraging through different loan forgiveness programs that encourage health care workers to practice in rural communities. And with that has to come the additional infrastructure in housing, in child care, in great public schools, in great public parks. And so this investment in the workforce has to come with investment in making sure that the community is a great place to live, that it's a multi-generational place to live, which is why public education, local government funding, and health care are three of our top priorities.

Kristin Brey: So shifting gears a little bit to protecting older adults from online scams. So it's estimated that Wisconsinites lose $1.2 billion each year to online scams. And obviously, older adults usually have an over-representation of the greatest financial and emotional harm. So in your view, is this a consumer protection problem, a public safety problem, or an affordability problem?

Francesca Hong: Oh, it's all three. And When I was encouraged by the legislation that passed this past session when it comes to some of the crypto, the kiosks, I think that federal legislation, we're seeing some bipartisan support for regulating and prevention and financial fraud and scams. But this is where we have to tackle it comprehensively. There's legislation that's been introduced in Vermont where property taxes on those who are on fixed income fall under a different tax bracket and would have a separate rate. We rely heavily on property taxes for local government funding, another reason why we need to lift levies and change that formula.

We would be in support of legislation where any the accessibility to some of these kiosks, I believe, is at the root of a big part of the problem in making sure that any grocery store or gas station that may have some of these crypto kiosks, that the workers there have to be trained and be working under the guidance of a bank teller, that there would be mechanisms and questions in place before that these could be operated. And I think this is also a financial freedom and security problem where when we address some of the other…

When we address some of the other larger epidemics that come with our aging population and communities, when it comes to loneliness, when it comes to mental health resources, I think heavily investing in those areas and making sure that there are community building opportunities, that this is all part of the vulnerability that comes with making, helping to decrease the vulnerability in our 65 plus population and communities, being more susceptible to financial fraud schemes. We have to tackle this holistically and comprehensively.

Carolyn Kaiser: What do you see holding the tech companies more accountable? As these scams become more on social media, artificial intelligence is making them more targeted, they're very good at it, and how much responsibility should the tech companies bear for these scams as they hurt the victim.

Francesca Hong: I think they should hold full responsibility and accountability, but we have to build the metrics and infrastructure of what that looks like and how the state may have to regulate it with how quickly AI technology is advancing and regulating, both from a practical standpoint and a state regulatory standpoint. There are some things happening in Europe, but this is a very evolving industry. It's pretty terrifying, which is why another reason I'm in full support of a moratorium on AI data centers as a way to, in a time where the regulation, it's unclear what will actually be enforceable. that we do our part in the state to prevent data centers where surveillance and additional data can be held to advance this type of technology that we hold. We do our part in the state to stop that from happening here.

Carolyn Kaiser: So would you be able, as a governor, to write an executive order to put a moratorium on?

Francesca Hong: An executive order on a moratorium is not the route that I would take. It is the one that we are exploring. I think the temporary nature of that, it is a special session that I would call on day one to bring the legislature in to look at the legislation that I have introduced. My bill is on the moratorium and data centers. We also have another data center. regulation bill that

Democrats introduced and the Republicans didn't give it a public hearing and now it's sitting there and so I would call in special sessions to bring action on to these this legislation and continue to look at at how we can support local governments who are putting in the moratoriums and make sure that we're working to build in the type of regulation that helps to keep communities safe from online scams and how can we also protect workers from the growth of AI?

Carolyn Kaiser: Okay, thank you.

Kristin Brey: So thus far, a lot of times when there's an online scam, it's kind of framed as a consumer problem. A lot of the burden is on the consumers to be watching out for scams. The Wisconsin Alliance has seminars for retirees on how to spot it. But how do you shift that responsibility from the consumer to the tech companies that are letting where these online scams are spreading?

Francesca Hong: I think that's a combination of investing into the Attorney General's office, looking at punitive measures for when these are happening, so that it continues, you know, that we're, I think, shifting that burden also means putting consumers in a position where they have more power and resources to be able to fight, while fighting at both the federal and state level, and looking at having stricter standards, regulations, and how they can operate in our state.

Carolyn Kaiser: In that same realm of thinking about getting scammed, it's way more than a scary story, you know, it's your retirement savings being gone, It's like, should I take my meds today or just take them on Tuesdays and Fridays? Or, and I don't want to tell anyone I've been scammed, but really I should tell someone because I don't want them scammed. So what departments do you think, or who can you direct to really dive into helping not only regulate, but enforce this?

Francesca Hong: Through state agencies in the Department of Revenue, in conversations with the Attorney General's office and having legal resources available, hotlines, making sure that resources that remain anonymous for folks who may have questions, but also making sure that the relationships or the community resources that are available, how can we continue to expand and uplift them through the state? I think that regulating financial institutions, there's a lobby that you have to fight there too. And I think it's important that those aren't the folks with the most resources and the strongest voices, that we have, you know, the representatives, the elected officials who are supposed to lobby on behalf of the people who are being, who are the victims here. And so does that mean creating additional commission or committee a blue ribbon commission at the state to look at that. I think that it's important that those with the platform continue to talk more about it, that there are different, that we make sure we have, there's, There's a stigma that has to come with changing the narrative and the cult and the perception. And I think those are different communications strategies. And as the governor, you have the largest megaphone. It's important that you're uplifting back to.

Carolyn Kaiser: Once they're scammed, then if you call someone, you're often say, go online and fill out a form. And that's not what people want to hear. They want to talk to a person and relay their story. and get some help. And so as an older person, we're looking for steps that would reach that goal.

Francesca Hong: Are there, I mean, I think locally different hotlines or having resources that are available in public places like libraries as well. Is that something that you've already been seeing?

Carolyn Kaiser: I have not seen anything in the library, but I'm looking at some kind of training even for law enforcement in the rural counties to say, I can go to my county sheriff's office or whatever, you know, something like that, because people know people in your local area where we're not-- Well, that's.

Francesca Hong: Where local government funding is so important too, because that's where our local law enforcement is funding, but they're-- to be, yeah, to have that available in your local government offices, I think is an important resource that we could certainly look at state funding for materials, information, making it more accessible, but somewhat discreet, I guess. Okay.

Carolyn Kaiser: Thank you.

Francesca Hong: Yeah.

Kristin Brey: All right, and then final question is AI is here, as we've already discussed. It's only getting smarter and more sophisticated, and scammers can cast a wider and wider net. So what could or should Wisconsin be doing to stay ahead of this AI fraud, especially when it comes to protecting older Americans?

Francesca Hong: Yeah, look, I'm a team human. It doesn't mean I'm fully AI, but I don't want it to control us. And I think the state needs to be looking at every measure and making sure that the advance in the AI technology isn't weaponized against some of our most vulnerable and important communities. It does, I think, making me realize more that it needs to be localized, that how is it our county and local governments and communities, people finding places where it's already information is available, getting that input directly from our seniors and folks where there's a information gathering, a reporting line of where this is happening so we can continue to put into an office of AI or within our universities where they're building new AI research areas. I think it's important that we have this sort of if we're going to build good regulatory measures and laws around it, that we have the folks where this is happening to build into the type of regulation that we need to build. But for us, I think it's important to be unafraid in overregulating AI right now at the speed and scale in which it's growing. All right, well, thank you.

Kristin Brey: Where can people find more information about you and your campaign?

Francesca Hong: You can go to FrancescaHong.com or FrancescaHongWI on social media.

Kristin Brey: All right, thank you so much.

Francesca Hong: Thank you.

Carolyn Kaiser: Thank you.

Francesca Hong: Thank you so much.