



Wisconsin Alliance for Retired Americans

Interview with Joel Brennan, candidate for Wisconsin Governor

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Ross Winklbauer: Hi, Joel. I'm Ross Winklbauer, Sr., and I'm the president of the Wisconsin Alliance for Retired Americans, and I'm pleased to welcome you to the Wisconsin Alliance for Retired Americans 2026 Wisconsin Gubernatorial Candidate Interview Series.

Wisconsin is home to a rapidly growing older adults. Today, 1 in 5 people in Wisconsin are over age 65. But over the next 4 years, that'll grow to 1 in 4. The decisions our next governor makes will have a significant impact on their 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 changes, challenges facing other Wisconsinites.

Each candidate has been invited to participate. Under the same format, and will be asked the same core questions. And with that, I'd like to introduce Democratic gubernatorial Candidate Joel Brennan. Joel, would you like to give a brief introduction about yourself?

Joel Brennan: I sure would, Ross, and I appreciate you giving me the invitation and the opportunity here. A little bit about me, I'm the 10th of 11 kids in the Brennan family, so grew up in a large family. It's been in Wisconsin for 5 generations. Over the course of the last 30 years, I've had a number of experiences in government, in the nonprofit sector, in business. Where I've been somebody who has been about trying to solve problems. And longest stint I had in my career was as the head of Discovery World, which is the state's largest science museum located in Milwaukee.

But I... I was doing that in 2018, when Tony Evers got elected and asked me to come and serve as the Secretary of Administration for him. And I did that for 3 years, including half of the time that I was doing it, or 2 thirds of the time during that was COVID. So, I had an opportunity to see the inside of state government from the perch of the job that really was about how do you run the executive branch? And I'm really proud of the work that we did.

So, during the time that I was Secretary of administration, we created the state's largest budget surplus to state history, in state history. We took a rainy day fund and grew it by about five-fold. And then during COVID, we got resources that had to go out to seniors, to family farmers, to individuals who couldn't keep a roof over their head, to small businesses, and we had to make government work. And I hope that our conversation today is going to be about how we make government work for seniors?

Because there's a whole bunch of ways in which chaos and division and destruction has happened, especially at the federal level, but I can tell you what I have seen and what I have demonstrated, what I learned during my time in state government, is it's easy to break things in government, much harder to make them work for people, but there are lots of ways in which government is not working for people not working for seniors in Wisconsin, and trickling down to every community, and I'm somebody who has demonstrated that that's what I'm about. That's what I'm about trying to solve problems, trying to get things done for people, and that's why I'm eager to have this conversation with you today.

Ross Winklbauer: Well, thank you. As you just mentioned, Wisconsin population is growing fast. We're losing our hair, like me. By 20... by 2030, we're talking 1.3 million plus residents, 65 and older, and that generation leans hard on hospitals and health services. Meanwhile, many Wisconsin hospitals are on the brink of closing. Especially in rural areas where seniors don't have a backup plan. As governor, what would you actually do to keep Wisconsin hospitals financially afloat so older adults and everyone else can still get emergency care, inpatient treatment, and basic health services without driving an hour to find it?

Joel Brennan: Well, and this is, you know, you say we're on the brink of this. In certain places in Wisconsin, it's already happening. You know, in the Chippewa Valley, you've had, in the last couple years, 2 hospitals close, and 18 clinics, and, you know, there are places around the state where, you know, you used to be able to count on some of that rural care that just isn't there anymore. And while this is not an issue just for seniors, it's an issue also for, you know, expectant parents. You know that in Wisconsin, 26 out of 72 counties don't have a practicing OB/GYN in them anymore, and that's worse than it was just 4 or 5 years ago. So access, in general, is something that's a huge issue, no matter where you go around the state.

The things that I want to do, you know, there are basics around healthcare that I think we need to meet. One, we need to ensure that Wisconsin is on a path towards a public option. The path that I support is expanding on the state health insurance plan, which already covers a quarter of a million people. It has reimbursement rates that are closer to private pay than what you get in Medicaid. We also should be doing what 40 other states have done and expanding Medicaid, while it's not as valuable as it was before Trump, Scott Walker should have done this 12 years ago, when we first had the opportunity.

Had we done that, we'd have another \$2.5 billion to be meeting the needs in places around the state, but we still should do that. We should make sure that we are doing things to reduce the cost of prescription drugs, because there are many seniors in Wisconsin who are deciding whether this month they're gonna, you know, get their prescription drugs or pay the utility bill.

There are ways that we should be doing this, but it starts with expanding access to care wherever possible, having... making sure that we are expanding Medicaid and providing a long-term option towards a public option. But the other thing that we can do is... there are federal funds that we have gotten, you know, there's a lot that's being disrupted at the federal level. The Medicaid cuts, the worst of which are happening after the midterm elections, and

\$800 billion of those cuts over the next decade. Like, those are things that we're going to feel, but there are resources. We have rural stabilization funds that are coming from the federal government. We still have 4 years of those, about \$200 million a year, to deploy in the right way in state government, and to be able to leverage those so that families are staying where they are, where seniors are able to age in their homes.

You are absolutely correct that we are getting older as a state, and we're going to continue to do that. But it's about the value, the honor of allowing people not to just go to the emergency room, but to age in their own home, to have the ability to self-determine what they're doing. Our resources that are already available in state government, we need to make sure that we are deploying those in the right way so that we are not doing what is the most inefficient and most expensive way to deliver care, which is just allowing, just waiting till people end up in the emergency room.

We need to make sure that there's infrastructure around for the long term so that people can have the dignity of aging at home, but also have the long-term benefit of being able to stay healthy in their homes.

Ross Winklbauer: So, I guess, following up on that a little bit. What do you see as far as the governor being able to do? To make sure that these hospitals stay financially afloat.

Joel Brennan: Well, I mean, there are... the way that we do that are the reimbursement rates that we have around Medicaid in Wisconsin, the ability for more people to enroll. One of the challenges that we have elsewhere, everywhere in Wisconsin, is around the healthcare workforce.

We need, over the course of the next decade, about 2,000 to 3,000 nurses just to be able to meet the basic needs that we have. In addition to clinicians and technicians, like, we need to make sure that there's a pathway for people to be getting into that. There are ways that the governor can be part of that through our, you know, apprenticeships that we do, and making sure that there's long-term investment in workforce.

We also can just be ensuring over time that we are meeting the needs of seniors, again, to not only just be around the hospitals and doing that for acute care, but making sure that we are doing what we need around long-term care.

So maybe we're going to have more questions about what we're doing with IRIS, what we're doing with, you know, family care and things like that, but those are the ways that we continue to do that, and ensuring that, you know, we are meeting the needs of people in communities around the state.

Ross Winklbauer: Thank you. If you're an older adult who doesn't drive anymore. Especially out in a rural area. Getting to the doctor or the grocery store isn't a given anymore. What's your plan to actually improve transportation options for seniors who's given up those keys?

Joel Brennan: Yeah, well, you know, this is an issue. We were in, in Belmont.

Ross Winklbauer: Cool.

Joel Brennan: over the weekend, which was the original state capital of Wisconsin, I think for, like, 40 days before they were planning to go somewhere else, so it is the original. And there were people there, you know, and that's in southwestern Wisconsin, but it's still... right now, those are becoming bedroom communities to Dane County and Madison, and the discussion there was around that very thing.

There are, you know, I think the long-term answer for, us our regional transit authorities. It starts with making sure that we are investing in the state level appropriately with the existing transit solutions that we have in communities in Wisconsin. But ultimately, like many other states have done, it is looking at a multi-county approach that ensures that there can be that level of intentional planning around how we're going to meet those needs over time, and ultimately around how can there be a dedicated funding source for those regional transit authorities.

So, in the immediate, and we're not going to be there immediately, but in the immediate. It's how are we ensuring that the relationship between state and local government, which has really been, in some ways, broken over the last 15 to 20 years, how are we repairing that, ensuring that the money that, you know, that goes to state government comes back through state-shared revenue to local communities that that is being appropriately allocated so that we can be meeting some of those local transit needs.

But we are still going to be, in lots of ways, we're making up for lost time. And we're making up for disinvestment that's happened over the last generation under Scott Walker and under a Republican legislature over the last 15 years. And so, I think the long-term plan for us has to be, how do we look at the long-term picture for transit? And for me, that is regional transit authorities that have the ability to actually plan what the next 15 to 20 years are going to look like, make sure that they have a dedicated funding source. So they're investing in transit, they're investing in rail transportation, they're investing appropriately in how our things, how our roads and all of that intermodal transit. How is that going to look for the next generation?

So really, it is a short-term approach to see how we can make sure we're meeting the needs in the next few budgets here, but over the long term, it's how do we move toward a much more coherent statewide view than we have had over time. Like, this is an area where Wisconsin has failed to meet the challenges at the local level for a long time, and we need to step up, and as governor, that's what I'm going to be trying to do.

Ross Winklbauer: Okay, thank you. You kind of touched on this next question a little bit, but we're short on nurses, nursing assistants, home health aides, basically everyone we need right as demand for care is spiking. What's your plan to build up the workforce so older American adults are not left waiting for the care they need today?

Joel Brennan: Yeah, yeah, and it is an issue. You know, I think I threw out the number of 2,000 to 3,000 nurses a year for the next decade, and, you know, there are all of those other things. If there's a value, or if there's something that I think gives me some hope on it, I have an event tonight at Sauk Prairie High School, and Sauk Prairie is one of the places that used a workforce innovation grant from state government to create a medical careers center there. And they're turning out certified CNAs, they're turning out, you know, phlebotomists, even at the high school level, and I think that's part of what we need to do.

We certainly need to be looking at this at the university system. UW Green Bay, I was at recently, they've been able to increase their class of nurses from 50 up to about 300, and the technical schools, I think there's opportunities for us to invest there, but even in the high schools, because there is a direct link from what's going on in some of the high schools into the careers, and there are more and more people who are starting to look at how do we actually get into the workforce right away? College, even technical college isn't for everybody, and if we can make sure that there's a pathway, and we're starting to do that in the K-12 space, like, that is part of what we're going to do. It is going to be, you know, there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution.

There have to be ways for us to do this. And one of the best things, in my own family, we have had people who have started as CNAs, and then you go in, and then you can earn, you know, while you learn, and you continue to move up in the ranks there, and I think that's part of the way that we're going to do this.

Now, the other thing about this is ensuring that we are respecting the rights of people to organize, respecting the rights of people who are already working. And so, you know, there are nurses who have been organizing and creating unions in hospitals in Wisconsin. I respect and I support their , and I think that's part of what we should be doing, too, overall, is respecting people's rights as workers, respecting their rights to organize, because in something that's as important as healthcare and the delivery of healthcare and hospital services, you know, part of the reason why nurses organize is because it's around patient care.

If they're not in work conditions where they are, you know, they have the right kind of workday, where they're getting the ability to determine some of the course of what they're doing, if they don't have the respect and the rights that they have when it comes to their employment terms and their ability to make money, like, that will also keep people from going into the profession. And so, I think part of it is, you know, what that pipeline looks like, ensuring that that pipeline is there, but then respecting the people who are there as nurses and in the health profession, respecting their right to organize and their right to collectively bargain.

Ross Winklbauer: Well, thank you. Switching it up a little bit, Wisconsin consumers lose an estimated \$1.2 billion each year to online scams, with older adults often suffering the greatest financial and emotional harm. Is this a consumer protection problem, a public safety problem, or an affordability problem in your mind?

Joel Brennan: I'd choose D. I think it's all of the above, and I think it needs to be treated as such. You know, the level of sophistication of these scams with AI has gotten, you know, much more intense over the last several years. You know, sometimes it can be... and who amongst us hasn't had some experience with this, where, you know, it's the claim that it's your grandson and your granddaughter calling and, you know. You know, they just... they're stranded somewhere, and they need your help. Or it's a, you know, sophisticated thing around a financial scheme. Like, we hear more and more of those, and their ability to do this right... to do it well has been enhanced by AI and what's going on. And so, the state needs tools to be able to beat that. Is it a consumer protection issue? Absolutely.

The Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection needs to have the level of personnel to be able to meet these. But the other thing we need to do is, as the sophistication level goes up on the people who are trying to do harm to seniors and others in Wisconsin, our around that needs to also grow.

So, we need to make sure that we are making it as easy as possible for people in assisted living facilities, people in community centers, in public libraries, in other places where people gather, like, we need to make sure that we are part of ensuring that we have those, that people understand their rights, they understand what to look for, that they can be there to see, you know, the immediate, that their antenna go up where necessary. Like, all of those things are part of this.

And then the other part of it that the state absolutely needs to be part of is when these things happen, there needs to be immediate relief for seniors who have been victimized by this. There needs to be swift and certain punishment for those who are doing this. You know, there needs to be collaboration between DATCAP, the governor, and the state attorney general.

Joel Brennan: So, we need to make sure that we are all on the same page when we're dealing with these issues. But it is absolutely, you know, again, you called it a... it's a billion-dollar-plus problem in Wisconsin, and that's the financial side, but the emotional toll that it takes on individuals, the emotional toll that it takes on seniors, the level of embarrassment, but also just the fact that people's fortunes are at risk here. Like, those are things that make this one of the most important consumer protection and public safety issues in Wisconsin.

Ross Winklbauer: So, and how big of a priority would it be for your administration?

Joel Brennan: Well, to me, you know, the job that I had in state government as a Secretary of Administration was, it was the human resources for all of state government. So it, you know, like, I got to see everything in state government. I have also seen how we have hollowed out parts of state government. I think the worst is the Department of Natural Resources, but the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection wasn't far behind. And so, part of it is ensuring that we can make sure that they have the infrastructure that they need so that they can adequately and accurately assess what's going on so that we can be partners in it.

So, would it be a priority for me? Absolutely, because I think we need to be in a position where we have the workforce that can absolutely be able to meet the challenges and meet what we're facing, because the level of sophistication around the people who are trying to do harm by our residents in Wisconsin has gone up, and we, for a generation now, haven't really met the same needs. So we've met that where it is. So we need to be in a position to invest so that we can be able to fight that with the resources that we need.

Ross Winklbauer: A lot of these scams start on social media, as you said. And AI is making them more targeted. How much responsibility should tech companies bear for letting scams spread on their platforms, such as Meta, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and any other ones?

Joel Brennan: I think we should... they should be held to account. I think there are ways that they can be partnered to the state even before that stuff happens. Like, how do we ensure that there is the right level of mutual accountability on these things? So, you know, where possible, I think doing things... when we're going to be doing things out in communities where we want to get to senior centers, where we want to get to libraries, we want to get to public gatherings.

Those are things that those companies, if they feel and they say that they have a responsibility, they should be paying for, they should be partnering for us, with us, they should be able to be the first line of defense around this. And they have done a poor job in lots of ways, and I think it's the state's job to hold them accountable, both individually, but also, there are a number of ways in which we can join multi-state legal actions and the that the governor can be partnering with the attorney general. Like, those are the ways, I think, that you send a signal that Wisconsin is going to be a place that takes this absolutely very seriously, and that we will hold those to account if they're not responsible to the people in our state. I think, you know, that is something that the governor definitely and clearly needs to demonstrate a message on from the beginning, and where there are resources to be gathered, you know, whether it's resources that are gathered because somebody is building a data center, or they're doing work in the state of Wisconsin, like, those are resources that we should be using to make sure that we are mitigating some of the damage and the harm that is inevitable around these things. So some of it is, how do we have them help us up front, but it's also that they need to be paying to ensure that we are going to be able to brace ourselves or the worst of the online predators that are out there. We've been... we've spent years telling people, here's how to spot a scam. The Wisconsin Alliance even runs seminars for retirees.

Ross Winklbauer: But the losses keep climbing because the scammers keep getting smarter. How would you shift more of that burden off consumers and families and onto the platforms that let this stuff spread in the first place?

Joel Brennan: Yeah, well, I mean, that's really the conversation we were just having, is, you know, it is a... the best way to do this is financial and through accountability. There are lawsuits that have been filed that Wisconsin has been party to. There are going to be future efforts to ensure that we are meeting the needs more broadly of consumers around the country. We should be part of that, but Wisconsin needs to be a leader in this. We need to be aggressive, we

need to be active, and we need to hold those to account. And, you know, that can happen at the back end, but that's the worst time for it to happen, you know, where the losses have already been faced financially and emotionally, and the best way that we can do that is to send the signal that companies are going to be held to account. I would welcome the chance to work with the legislature on these. There are, you know, a number of ways. There are other states that have a privacy bill of rights, you know, about how you are sharing information, what you have the ability to do with your own information, and I think some of those things that we can do at the front end will start to mitigate some of the challenges, but again. You said it yourself, and we've had a whole conversation around here. They are getting more smarter around this, they're getting more sophisticated. We need to be responding in kind. And some of that is resources, some of it is having really smart people in Wisconsin who are our employees, have every right and every, have every... be equipped with all of the resources to be able to meet those challenges that we're going to face.

Ross Winklbauer: Great. And you've kind of touched on this, but for a lot of seniors, getting scammed isn't just a scary story. It means putting off a doctor's visit, Cutting back on essentials, or watching their retirement savings disappear. And the emotional toll sticks around. As governor, what would you do to beef up consumer protection, enforcement, actually help victims, and back up the Attorney General in going after the organized fraud? Yeah.

Joel Brennan: Well, again, that's been... like, the last three questions we have had have been really all about this, and it truly is, you know, I mean, my folks have both passed away. My dad would be 100 next year, my mom would be 100 the year after that, and they didn't... they never had to deal with this, but I have seen so many families who have had to do this, and watched while this happens personally to people, and what this means to them. And it is the responsibility that the state bears to be able to do this. So, again, whether it's victims and working with the financial institutions that are involved, and ensuring that there is immediate... that they can recoup some of the losses that they have had. If it's holding those to account, whether it's the perpetrators of this, or whether it's the platforms. There is a need for us to be vigilant on all of these things. Some of this is around legislation. Some of it is around ensuring that in the state budget, we have the appropriate amount of resources at a place like the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection. Some of it is just the signal that you can send as leaders that this is not going to be tolerated in Wisconsin, and when we are in a position where people are getting hurt by these things. We will fine the perpetrators, and we're going to do everything in our power to make sure that we are holding them to account. It's no different than, you know, that we are not having a conversation here about ICE and about what they're doing, but what's happening at the federal level, and what that means to people in states, like, we need to be in a position where your leaders are standing up to them and telling them that that's not going to happen in Wisconsin. We need to do it with ICE, but we also need to do it with these online predators, because the damage that they're doing to seniors, the damage that they're doing to our communities is intense and acute, and it's intolerable in Wisconsin.

Ross Winklbauer: So, my final question, and you pretty much talked about this already, but what should Wisconsin be doing right now, today, to get ahead of this next wave of AI-driven fraud, especially for our older residents?

Joel Brennan: Yeah, and what we should be doing... now, here's my, my, you know, my shameless pitch for me. Electing me should be the first thing in the next, you know, in the primary and then the general election. But beyond... and the reason why I say that is I have worked in state government, I ran, you know, my job was to help the governor run the executive branch, and that's where we have most of our consumer protection.

There are reasons and things that we need to do to buck things up with the legislature, there are things that we can make sure that we are doing to hold those to account, but the infrastructure that we have around consumer protection to ensure that we are trying to be as smart as they are before these things ever happen, to make sure that we're holding those to account when this happens with the Attorney General, to make sure that there are... when this happens to somebody, because inevitably. It will still happen to people, that there is support for them immediately, that there are ways that they know that they are not alone, that they're going to have partners working with their financial institutions, working with their own personal property.

Like, we have gutted and hollowed out some of that infrastructure within state government. So that's one of the first things in the next state budget, ensuring that people know that we are, building that back up, and we're going to hold those to account, and they're going to have partners all along the way. You know, like, that's, I think, the way you do this, but as much as anything, again, I think it's about sending the signal to the perpetrators out there, sending the signal to the platforms on which this happens, that Wisconsin is upping our game when it comes to this. We are going to be in a position where we're going to protect seniors.

We want to protect the ability for people to stay in their homes, to get the long-term care that they need, to have the dignity in their homes, but we're also going to protect them from these online scams and people who are out to do them harm. And I just think you need to do that with the spirit of the first budget that we do, with what we're going to invest in, and how we're going to be communicating with people that they know that they have their back. You said it yourself, Wisconsin's getting older. Those are people who have lived here. They deserve state government, a state government that they know is going to have their backs in times of need. And that means keeping them in their homes. It means being there alongside them as a partner every time that anything that they have is at risk.

Ross Winklbauer: Okay, thank you, Joe. As you know, we're going to be broadcasting this, showing it. So where, as people watch this, where can they find out more about your campaign?

Joel Brennan: www.brennanforwi.com. They can follow me on the social media channels. We're gonna be... there are advertisements that's out... that are out there. One thing that I wanna, you know, say that's a... I think it's a distinction between me and other candidates who are running in this race, Republican or Democrat.

You know, we all pay for somebody to go out and do opposition research into us, and I paid someone to do that, to have opposition research into me about what would be, you know, the good things and the challenges for me in the general election, I put it all online. 100 pages. I'm the only candidate in Wisconsin who's done it. I think I might be the only candidate nationally. But people need to know that there's a level of transparency around the candidates that are running for governor, and that that would be the kind of leader that I would be as governor. That's one thing I welcome, is for people to go online. You know, it's not a Danielle Steele, it doesn't read like a Danielle Steele novel, or it's not a page-turner like Stephen King, but it is about me, and it's about the things that I've done throughout my career, and people ought to have that level of access and that level of accountability and transparency with candidates who are running for office this fall.

Ross Winklbauer: Well, Joel, I want to thank you personally. I greatly appreciate you getting on today and talking with us. If you have anything else, great. If not, we will let you go so you can get back to your campaign. So once again, thank you so very much.

Joel Brennan: Appreciate it very much, Ross. Thanks for doing this for everybody, and for the seniors in Wisconsin. It's really important.

Ross Winklbauer: Alright, thank you. Have a great day.