**False conspiracies swirl as Wisconsin contact tracers battle the coronavirus**

*By Howard Hardee, Wisconsin Watch*

Having posed a series of increasingly paranoid-sounding questions about the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Appleton City Council member William Siebers cleared his throat, preparing for the most outlandish yet.

“I’ve got to be serious,” he said. “Are there going to be any cameras situated in the city of Appleton that (are) going to supervise anybody who is quarantined or isolated in their homes, to make sure they don’t leave their homes?”

Siebers’ question was designed to prompt a city staffer to explain that, despite what residents may have heard, Appleton was not planning to adopt an official Big Brother policy.

Conspiracy-tinged rumors swirled around Appleton ahead of the council’s June 17 online meeting. Council members received an email in May from somebody who claimed to have witnessed city employees installing surveillance cameras in parts of town that still lack cameras, Ald. Katie Van Zeeland said.

“So, there is this conspiracy theory that local government is at least partially responsible for some sort of surveillance system to make sure that when the state is under quarantine guidelines, people are staying at home,” Van Zeeland said. “Somebody is doing some fear mongering.”

A June 17 post on the Facebook page Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine urged Appletonians to oppose the City Council’s acceptance of up to $1.2 million in state reimbursement for its public health response to COVID-19.

The post warned that “bad stuff is about to happen at the council meeting tonight,” and “there are now cameras set up all over for surveillance.” It drew hundreds of reactions and comments online and fueled a barrage of questions to the council about contact tracing and isolation protocols from concerned residents — and from people who don’t live in Appleton.

Commenting by email on the out-of-towners who weighed in on the debate, Siebers said: “I got the impression that they were not aware that their (own) communities also have available to them money to reimburse (COVID-19) expenses.”

Van Zeeland took to Facebook to address the suspicions of residents who accused the government of overreaching in efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19. In an interview, she said she watched skeptics perform “mental gymnastics” to make conspiracy theories “make sense to them.”

The council decided to address the rumors head-on, “so staff could refute them,” Van Zeeland said.

The 15-member council voted unanimously to approve the funding. But the episode frustrated  Van Zeeland, who says local representatives are giving residents no reason to believe they are being watched, yet rampant misinformation has required them to prove that negative — a nearly impossible task.

“You can look at our budget; we have nothing like that in our budget,” she said. “You can look at all of our meetings and minutes. Everything is public; you can ask for my emails. … I guess I don’t know how to prove that something that does not exist does not exist. That’s the hard part about this.”

Appleton isn’t the only place in Wisconsin where coronavirus skeptics are making themselves  known. Employees of the Washington Ozaukee Public Health Department have reported receiving verbal harassment and threatening emails, and being followed while driving health department vehicles. The department’s logo has since been removed from the vehicles, the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported](https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/northshore/news/2020/07/02/public-health-employees-being-harassed-coronavirus-skeptics-suburbs/5357028002/).

**Contact tracing key pandemic tool**

Conspiracy theories about contact tracing have percolated on social media since early May, after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [published guidelines](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/principles-contact-tracing.html) on how state health authorities should implement this “core disease control measure” to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, which has killed at least [130,000 Americans](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html) — including about [800 Wisconsinites](https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/deaths.htm), according to government estimates.

President Donald Trump’s administration included contact tracing in its [Opening Up America Again guidelines](https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/) but left it up to state governments to assemble tracing teams.

Contact tracing identifies and informs people who have been in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has hired 1,000 contact tracers at $20 an hour to help track the virus’ spread, a strategy that experts touted as crucial in reopening the state’s economy and protecting public health.

But suspicion and mistrust of contact tracers quickly gained traction on Facebook and Twitter. [A social media monitoring project](https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/2020-local-fellows/) by Wisconsin Watch and First Draft News — an international nonprofit concerned with trust and truth in the digital age — has tracked a series of false narratives about the disease investigators.

The unsupported theories go well beyond a national grid of surveillance. Some suggest that Gov. Tony Evers has been selling the information gathered by contact tracers, while others say the tracers are “communist soldiers.”

Among the more bizarre: that contact tracers are tracking people by requiring a Wisconsin ID to get a haircut. And many posit that tracers work in conjunction with Child Protective Services to remove children from the homes of high-risk medical professionals — a popular theme of disinformation surrounding the issue, according to analysis by First Draft researcher Keenan Chen.

“While forced removal did happen in China and perhaps in some other countries, there has not been any indication or report that (U.S.) law enforcement agencies have used such a tactic,” he said.

**Bill number fuels false narrative**

Much of the social media misinformation surrounds HR 6666 — the [COVID-19 TRACE Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6666/text), sponsored by U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, an Illinois Democrat. The bill would direct $100 million to contact tracing programs. The bill’s assigned number happens to be one digit away from 666 — the “[number of the beast](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Number_of_the_beast)” — which only fueled suspicion from national figures such as Charlie Kirk, author of *The MAGA Doctrine*and a reported [sower of misinformation](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/us/politics/charlie-kirk-conservatives-coronavirus.html). In a viral Twitter post, he called tracing programs “a totalitarian power grab.”

Further muddying the waters, Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul [recently warned](https://www.doj.state.wi.us/news-releases/ag-kaul-warns-outlines-how-identify-contact-tracing-scammers) that scammers may be posing as contact tracers to steal personal information.

“Contact tracing is a key part of the effort to reduce transmission of the coronavirus, but it’s important to know that scammers may try to pose as contact tracers,” Kaul said in a statement. “Before giving anyone information for contact tracing, please make sure they are a legitimate contact tracer and not someone trying to commit identity theft.”

Real contact tracers won’t ask for money, your Social Security number, or bank or credit card information, Kaul said. They won’t identify the person who tested positive by name. They will call by phone — not send text messages or emails asking you to follow a link — and identify themselves by first and last name and their health department.

Public Health Madison and Dane County said in a June 30 Facebook post that local contact tracers are increasingly encountering “people with COVID-19, especially younger people, refusing to tell us the names of close contacts.”

“People might be hesitant to give the names of their contacts because they think they have been doing something ‘bad’ — like gathering — and don’t want to get others in trouble,” Christy Vogt, a health education coordinator for the county, said in an email. “Some people think they’ve already told their friends they tested positive and that that is ‘good enough.’ And others might be concerned that if they tell us close contacts, those people will be quarantined and unable to go to work, which could be a burden.

“We want to reiterate that our contact tracers are not getting anyone in trouble and aren’t here to judge — they just want to contain the spread of COVID-19 in our community.”

Despite the swirl of misinformation, Gabrielle Lentz, a contact tracer for the Trempealeau County Health Department, says it hasn’t interfered with her work. All of the residents she’s contacted have been cooperative and understanding of the protocol.

“I have not had any cases where people question what we’re doing,” she said. “Most people are aware that this is part of the process with COVID-19 cases at this point. Even pretty early on, we always just explained that we’re with the health department, that it’s confidential and why we’re following up. I haven’t had any bad feedback.”

Lentz emphasized that contact tracers are bound by state and federal law to keep personal information confidential. Data is uploaded into the [Wisconsin Electronic Disease Surveillance System](https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/wiphin/wedss.htm), “a secure, web-based system designed to facilitate reporting, investigation, and surveillance of communicable disease,” according to the DHS’ website.

“That is also confidential information that only select state epidemiologists and health departments have access to,” Lentz said.

**‘So much mistrust’**

Some level of skepticism of lockdown measures is understandable, said David Perlman, an expert on digital deception who founded [Cognitive Security Technologies](https://cogsec.tech/team/), a San Francisco-based firm that helps protect clients from “adversarial weaponized misinformation.”

“Under better circumstances, I think America is capable of having a pandemic response where we would do contact tracing, and then the government would pack up and go home when the crisis passed; it wouldn’t be a slippery slope (to authoritarianism),” he said. “But right now, there’s so much mistrust in the current federal government and it’s hard to be optimistic about that. Nobody is saying, ‘I’m sure it will be fine.’”

In a common theme of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, the May email to the Appleton City Council also mentioned fifth generation (5G) mobile phone networks.

Van Zeeland has received emails about the purported dangers of 5G since joining the council last year. And as the mother of an autistic child, she’s acutely aware of vaccination opponents, including some who cite [debunked research](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/05/health/measles-vaccine-autism.html) to support their claims. She senses crossover with the contact tracer conspiracy theorists.

“Crunchy moms saying, ‘You vaccinated your child and that’s why they’re autistic,’ I’ve had those interactions with people,” she said. “There’s a similarity there between the medical freedom people. They seem to be embracing these conspiracy theories as well.”

During the council’s June 17 meeting, Siebers asked if the city has or plans to forcibly remove anyone from their homes. He asked if there were plans to build or rent an isolation center in the city of Appleton. And finally, he wanted to know if cameras were monitoring people as they self-isolated or quarantined in their homes.

City staff answered “no” to each question.

“From what I gather,” Siebers said, “there’s some misinformation — bad information, in my opinion — being circulated.”

*Howard Hardee is a Madison-based journalist who reported this story for Wisconsin Watch. He is a fellow at First Draft, an organization that trains journalists to detect and report on disinformation.*