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Lincoln Journal Star

15th COVID-19 death reported in Lincoln; Douglas County surpasses 10,000 cases

By Nick McConnell

The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department on Wednesday reported a 15th death because of COVID-19, the community's first since July 17.

The man, who was hospitalized, was in his 50s.

Fifty new cases were reported, bringing the county's total to 2,945. Sixteen people with COVID-19 were hospitalized in Lincoln, including six from outside Lancaster County.

Douglas County topped a milestone Wednesday with 121 new cases, pushing its total to 10,008. Three deaths were reported in the county, including a man in his 20s. The death toll in Douglas County is 127.

On Wednesday evening, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported 25,422 statewide cases and 324 deaths. That includes 265 new cases Wednesday.

The 137 patients hospitalized with COVID-19 in Nebraska were the most in more than a month.

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Kearney Hub

10 new regional COVID-19 cases reported Tuesday

KEARNEY – Ten new cases of COVID-19 were reported in this region Tuesday by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

These includes six in Buffalo County, one in Dawson County, one in Gosper County and two in Kearney County.

Since record keeping began March 20, the seven-county Two Rivers Public Health District has recorded 1,288 cases of COVID-19.

Totals in each county, as of 6 p.m. Tuesday, are:
- Dawson - 917
- Buffalo - 293
- Phelps - 32
- Kearney - 22
- Gosper - 14
- Franklin - 9
- Harlan - 1

Nebraska has had 25,157 positive cases of COVID-19 and 321 deaths, four of which happened in the last 24 hours. For more information, visit dhhs.ne.gov.

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Grand Island Independent

TestNebraska tests in Aurora as Central District's positivity rate rises

By Austin Koeller

AURORA — Hamilton County residents were able to get tested for COVID-19 by TestNebraska on Wednesday in Aurora.

Teresa Anderson, health director for the Central District Health Department, said testing was offered from 2-4 p.m. at East Park Villa, 1704 L St. She said this was the second time testing was offered in Aurora. The first was last week.

TestNebraska in Aurora was made possible by a contract with Memorial Community Health.

"We are pleased that we are able to offer testing at in Grand Island and in Aurora because we think that will increase the number of people who actually get tested," she said. "What we are finding is the more slots we offer, the more slots we need to offer. In central Nebraska, it is not always easy to get a test, so we are doing our best to open up slots as quickly as we can."

When asked how many people got tested, Andrew Hills, emergency response coordinator for CDHD, said the organization had scheduled 70 tests Wednesday.

Anderson said CDHD's overall COVID-19 positivity rate is 12%. The rate is 15% in Hall County, 6% in Hamilton County and 10% in Merrick County. She said the results are from 250 COVID-19 tests.

The results for Wednesday's tests will not be available until at least Saturday, Anderson said.

Last week, Anderson said the overall positivity rate for the Central District was 7%, She said it was exceptionally higher in Hamilton County (17%).

“Positivity rate is a hard thing to quantify because no matter what you think, you are going to be proven wrong,” Hills said. “We could take a guess and say, ‘Last week’s positivity rate might be ‘X’ percent and be the same this week. If it has gone down from one week to the next, does that show a trend? Or, on that occasion, did we happen to test a lot of infected people?’ It is very difficult to make a week-by-week decision. You have got to plot this all out and look at it.”

On Wednesday, Hills said, volunteers from Memorial Community Health helped conduct the nasal swabs.

Justise Rhoden of Aurora got tested Wednesday.

“I had felt a little funny this week. I kept my distance from people and thought since we have the testing now available here in Aurora, I would take advantage of it,” she said. “The test went really well. We all know the test is not the most comfortable, but most things in life are not comfortable, so we just have to do what we can.”

Rhoden said she thought having TestNebraska in Aurora was “a great opportunity” to keep COVID-19 testing local. She applauded Memorial Community Health’s site selection.

“It is in a really great location, so people can find it,” Rhoden said. “But it is also far enough off that it is not disrupting the community.”

Tina Hunt, marketing director for Memorial Community Health, agreed with Rhoden and said the TestNebraska site ran “very smoothly” Wednesday.

“We are very happy to have East Park Villa and their residents and administration agreed to use this as (location) a test area,” she said. “It is important there are more options available for individuals who are ill. We see patients at our clinic and are able to do testing there, as well. So the two scenarios work well together.”

TestNebraska is scheduled to be at East Park Villa in Aurora from 2-4 p.m. every Wednesday through Aug. 26. Those interested in getting tested through TestNebraska must complete the assessment at testnebraska.com to determine whether they qualify.

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Sioux City Journal

Tyson to launch expanded COVID-19 testing of workers, add 200 health care jobs

By Dave Dreeszen

SIOUX CITY -- Tyson Foods plans to launch regular, weekly testing of its workforce, as part of a

stepped-up effort to avert spread of the virus, like the outbreaks that sickened thousands of employees and idled or slowed production at several of the company's area meat plants this spring.

As part of an expanded monitoring program it will announce Thursday morning, Tyson also will hire nearly 200 nurses and administrative support personnel to support the 400 people that are now part of the company's health services team.

The expanded roster of nurses will conduct the on-site tests and assist with care management, coordinating treatment for employees who contract the respiratory disease.

To support the increased staffing strategy, Tyson also will create a chief medical officer position at the corporate level.

Four company representatives shared details of Tyson's new monitoring initiative with a Journal reporter during a Zoom meeting Wednesday.

"This is a very proactive way for us to do our best to stay ahead of this virus, rather than what we've experienced in the recent past," Hector Gonzalez, Tyson's senior vice president for human resources, told The Journal.

In the initial stages of the pandemic, Tyson and other meatpackers struggled to contain the virus in plants, where workers traditionally work side by side in production lines and often share crowded locker rooms and cafeteria and rides to work.

Tyson already has tested around 40,000 workers, or nearly a third of its workforce. Of its 122,000 employees, less than 1 percent, or about 1,200, are active COVID-19 cases, according to the company.

The company conducted mass testing at several plants where large-scale outbreaks occurred, including its flagship beef plant in Dakota City, just across the border from Sioux City. By far the metro area's largest employer, the plant temporarily shut down in early May after nearly 790 of the 4,500 workers and contractors tested positive for the virus.

Tyson also temporarily idled several other plants, including pork facilities in Storm Lake, Columbus Junction, Perry and Waterloo, Iowa, and Madison, Nebraska, after hundreds of workers were infected.

Under its expanded monitoring approach, the company will test thousands of workers each week across all of its 140 facilities.

"That will be ongoing all the time," Tyson senior vice president Scott Brooks, who leads the company's COVID testing efforts, told The Journal.

"As we expand this, we're going to be touching even those facilities where we don't know if we have any cases," he said. "So it's going to be a significant expansion."

While it's not logistically possible to test all workers every week, the monitoring program will provide a sample of the workforce, Brooks said.

Workers with no symptoms may be selected for testing based on an algorithm-based selection process that considers various scientific data. The number tested each week will be dynamic and adjusted based on factors, such as the number of positive cases involving plant workers and the community.

Other information also will factor into the weekly testing process, said Dr. Daniel Castillo, chief medical officer for Matrix Medical, a private clinic services company Tyson retained this year to conduct on-site screenings.

"There are some people, because of their nature of the work, who might interact more with others. So that data would trigger that algorithm to identify those folks to be tested perhaps more often," Castillo said.

"It's continuously learning and updating based on up-to-date data, who needs to be tested, how often and what's the baseline testing rate."

Castillo praised Tyson for its forward-thinking approach to mitigating the risk of the virus.

"I do believe that this is something other organizations will look to adapt," he said. "I expect that we'll be hearing a lot more of these type of approaches from other companies."

Marc Perrone, international president of the United Food and Commercial Workers, the largest union representing Tyson hourly workers, urged other industry employers to follow Tyson's lead and "take immediate action to expand COVID monitoring as we work to flatten the curve.

"Together, we will continue to look for new and better ways to protect the health and safety of the brave frontline workers who are so important to the nation's food production system," Perrone said in a news release from Tyson.

Tyson officials point out the expanded monitoring and increased health staff hiring is the latest in a series of precautions and safety measures the company has taken since the pandemic struck.

Workers have their temperatures taken daily by infrared scanners at plant entrances and also are required to wear facial coverings.

More than 500 social distance monitors also have been installed in plants to track social distancing efforts and ensure personal protective equipment is worn properly.

Workers who test positive receive paid leave and may return to work only after they meet criteria established by Tyson and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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NET

Legislature Blocks Meatpacking Safety Bill; Debates Abortion Restriction

The Nebraska Legislature Wednesday rejected an effort to introduce a bill calling for coronavirus safety measures in meatpacking plants. And lawmakers debated a bill prohibiting certain abortion procedures. (By way of caution, this report contains some graphic language).

Sen. Tony Vargas wanted to introduce the meatpacking safety bill, which would have included requirements like 6-foot-distances between workers and required temperature checks. Vargas is the son of Peruvian immigrants whose father died from COVID-19, and he represents a largely Hispanic South Omaha district. He said while Nebraskan's population is 11 percent Hispanic, that group represents 60 percent of the state's COVID-19 cases. Vargas said twenty percent of those cases are among meatpacking workers, not counting infected family members and friends, with 230 hospitalizations and 21 deaths.

"COVID-19 has affected us. But the part that's harder about all of this is that it doesn't affect all of us equally. It affects some of our businesses. It affects our well-being. But in terms of the health of individuals… it's just hurting people that look like me, and it's hurting people that look like me that are working essential jobs that don't have the choices as to whether they can or cannot show up to work," Vargas said.

Sen. Joni Albrecht opposed introducing the bill. Albrecht said her district includes a Tyson plant, which she called the largest packing plant in the country, in Dakota City. She said the plant employs 4,300 people and has had 600 cases of COVID-19, but only seven hospitalizations.

"I have not had one phone call to my office from any employee complaining about that plant," Albrecht said.

Sen. Mike Groene also opposed introducing the bill, saying meatpacking should not be singled out.

"Everybody got caught off guard with COVID -- everybody. Every industry. And the private business has reacted quickly. Twenty one deaths, but when was the last one?" Groene said.

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson Leah Bucco-White said Wednesday the most recent death from COVID-19 among meatpacking workers was July 12.

Sen. Steve Erdman also opposed Vargas's initiative. Erdman said from talking to people in the meatpacking industry about safety precautions, he had reached a conclusion.

"The virus is not spreading in the meatpacking facilities. The virus is spreading in the six people that ride together in the car to work; and the people that get together after work and several people live in the same house; and they're catching the virus and getting infected outside of the plant," Erdman

said.

Sen. Tom Brewer said cattle producers and meatpackers in his Sandhills district were worried about the bill.

“They were chilled to the bone. They said if we do this, you will force us to close or reduce production to a level that will not be sustainable for our businesses,” Brewer said, asking Vargas “How would you respond to that?”

“The concern that you bring up is the exact concern that we should have when we have a hearing,” Vargas replied.

Vargas needed special permission to introduce the bill later than the usual limit of the first 10 days of the session. Sen. Matt Williams, supporting Vargas, asked rhetorically if something had changed to justify suspending that rule.

“I would argue yes, that there has been something that has changed, and that’s COVID. It has changed every one of our lives,” Williams said.

And Sen. Ernie Chambers suggested the lack of protections for workers showed a double standard.

“The work in these plants has been deemed essential. But the workers have been deemed expendable. That should not and cannot be,” Chambers said.

It would have required votes from 30 senators to introduce the bill. Vargas got only 28, with 10 senators opposed and 11 not voting. He later introduced it as an amendment to another bill, and it will have a public hearing next Thursday. But that bill is not prioritized, making further legislative action this year extremely unlikely.

Wednesday afternoon, senators took up a proposal by Sen. Suzanne Geist to prohibit an abortion procedure known medically as “dilation and extraction,” or D &E, and called “dismemberment abortion” by abortion opponents. The procedure is sometimes used in second trimester abortions.

“LB814 would end the practice of killing a live baby in the second trimester of pregnancy by pulling off its arms and legs piece by piece until it either bleeds to death, the spinal cord is cut, or its skull is crushed,” Geist said.

Sen. Megan Hunt opposed the bill, saying it would prohibit what is sometimes the safest procedure for a woman seeking to end a pregnancy, possibly because of fetal abnormalities.

“The decision about the most appropriate method to end a pregnancy – it belongs to the woman and her doctor. Not with politicians, because every pregnancy is different,” Hunt said.

Sen. Adam Morfeld, opposing the bill, said it is unconstitutional, under Supreme Court precedent.

“The state cannot put a restriction on abortion that is not medically necessary, because it would impose an undue burden on a woman’s constitutional right. There is no ambiguity in this,” Morfeld said.

But Sen. Mike Hilgers, supporting the bill, disagreed.

“Nebraska has already banned abortions after 20 weeks. The federal government has banned partial-birth abortions. Whatever the Supreme Court’s jurisprudence is on abortion, it is necessarily true that the state can prohibit some,” Hilgers said.

Senators used up the time allotted for debate without reaching a vote, meaning Geist will have to show she has enough votes to overcome a filibuster for it to be scheduled for further debate. Her office said she is working on securing that support, and is optimistic she can get it.

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Lincoln Journal Star

Senators block legislative hearing for meatpacking workers amid pandemic

By Don Walton

An impassioned effort by Sen. Tony Vargas of Omaha to give meat processing workers and their advocates an opportunity to bring their concerns about the outbreak of COVID-19 in packing plants directly to the Legislature fell two votes short of approval Wednesday.

Hours later, Vargas filed an amendment to rewrite a pending bill to mandate a series of safety measures, including a provision requiring 6 feet of distancing between workers on meat processing production lines.

That could be accomplished by slowing production line speeds, staggering work shifts and work breaks, or adjusting the number of employees in work shifts, according to language in the amendment.

The amendment, which lists a number of other actions that employers would be required to take to protect workers, would rewrite LB667, which Vargas had introduced to fund youth work development and training assistance. That bill is currently in the Business and Labor Committee.

The senator's proposal to suspend legislative rules to allow introduction of a new bill in the fading days of this year's session fell just short of meeting the 30-vote threshold, failing on a 28-10 count.

Eleven senators who were present chose not to cast a vote.

Vargas said his proposal offered an opportunity to determine "if there is anything we can do" to help alleviate effects of the virus in Nebraska's meat processing plants, where nearly 5,000 workers have been infected.

Twenty-one workers have died; 223 have required hospitalization.

His proposal would focus on health and safety standards, Vargas said.

Vargas, whose father died in New York City in April after a lengthy battle with the virus that included 29 days of hospitalization, is the only Latino member of the Legislature and represents a heavily Latino legislative district in south Omaha.

The meat processing workforce in Nebraska is largely composed of Latino, immigrant and refugee employees.

Vargas said a public hearing would allow senators to "hear what is happening on both sides" of the issue by also giving a voice to company representatives who say they've taken aggressive action to protect employees by providing face masks and shields, along with scrubbing and sanitizing the workplace.

Workers on the rapidly moving production lines labor shoulder-to-shoulder and often directly across from one another.

Opponents of the Vargas motion centered on the actions already taken by the plants to protect workers, and a number of senators stressed the importance of protecting Nebraska agriculture by keeping the meat processing plants fully operational.

Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon pointed to the impact on the cattle industry "if we do something that grinds this to a halt," either by forcing closure or "reducing production to a level that is not sustainable."

"We all need them open," Sen. Joni Albrecht of Thurston said.

Sen. Matt Williams of Gothenburg said the large Tyson meat processing plant in Lexington has "really stepped up and implemented all that they can," following a series of recommendations provided by the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

But, he said, he would support Vargas so that "workers will have an opportunity to share their stories (and) the industry will have an opportunity to share specific things they have done and how they have stepped up" to meet the challenge.

Sen. Mike Moser of Columbus, the sole member of the Legislature who has contracted the virus, said he believes plants are taking the advice of UNMC and responding with worker protections. But he voted to support a legislative hearing.

"We can at least listen and figure out a way to respond," Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha said. "Let them be heard."

Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard argued that "the virus is not spreading in the meatpacking facilities," but rather among workers who live in crowded conditions and are "getting infected outside the plant."

Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte said "this issue already has been addressed" by the meat processing plants.

"I do think plants have this under control with hot spots here and there," Sen. Curt Friesen of Henderson said.

Sen. Sara Howard of Omaha said senators owe a colleague the courtesy of granting his request for a hearing prior to adjournment of the 2020 legislative session next month because of dramatically changed conditions.

"Please don't expect courtesy if you don't extend it," she said.

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Omaha World Herald

Omaha lawmaker tries another avenue to allow discussion of meatpacking plant conditions

By Paul Hammel

An Omaha senator's effort to have meatpacking plants adopt additional COVID-19 safety measures isn't over, despite a legislative setback Wednesday.

State Sen. Tony Vargas, whose South Omaha district includes many workers who labor in slaughter houses, fell two votes short Wednesday of suspending state legislative rules so he could introduce a bill, after the bill filing deadline, that would mandate several safety measures.

But shortly after the 28-11 vote, Vargas filed an amendment to another of his proposals, Legislative Bill 667, that contains his packinghouse measure, which includes requiring a 6-foot distance between workers, slowing down production lines and providing free face masks and shields to workers.

He has requested a public hearing on his proposal, which could be scheduled as early as late next week.

"I was elected to continue to fight for people. When one door closes, we look for another door," the senator said.

Vargas, whose father died of COVID-19 in New York, said during floor debate on Wednesday that he wanted to give voice to the concerns of the state's meatpacking plant workers, who work in crowded facilities that have been hot spots for the virus. Most workers are Latino, who represent 11% of the state's population but 60% of the state's 25,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus. Twenty

percent of all cases have been meatpacking workers.

“This is hurting people who look like me,” said Vargas, whose parents emigrated from Peru. “These are people who are working in our essential jobs, who don’t have the choice of whether to show up or not for work.”

The senator said that holding a public hearing would also allow lawmakers to hear about precautions being taken by packers, and to learn about the impact of the spread of coronavirus in communities that host such operations.

Opponents of the rules suspension said that meatpackers have already taken precautions, and that Vargas could accomplish the same goals by conducting interim study hearings this fall after the legislative session ends. They said that the spread of the virus in packing plants had been largely contained.

“It’s not needed and we don’t have time left,” said State Sen. Joni Albrecht of Thurston, whose district includes the nation’s largest packing plant, Tyson Foods in Dakota City, which employs 4,300 workers. Albrecht said her office had not fielded one complaint from a packing plant worker, and she was convinced, after talking to Tyson officials, that they’d taken all reasonable precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

But supporters of Vargas’ effort said that they’d fielded plenty of concerns, and that allowing at least a public hearing on the issue in the waning days of the legislative session would help rebuild “trust” that the Legislature is addressing the leading problems in the state.

“The data clearly shows that Hispanics have been disproportionately affected.” Vargas said. “If you don’t see the urgency in this and the need to act now, then I am at a loss.”

Quarantine section: The quarantine section of the legislative chamber, the East Balcony, was down to one senator Wednesday.

State Sen. Julie Slama of Peru announced Wednesday that she had tested negative for COVID-19 and had been cleared to return to the floor.

She had sat in the balcony, which is high above the legislative floor, on Monday and Tuesday after some family members contracted the virus.

Lincoln Sen. Adam Morfeld, however, remained in the East Balcony on Wednesday. Morfeld said he had been in frequent contact with someone who recently tested positive for the virus, and he had joined Slama, at a distance, on Tuesday.

Neither senator reported having any symptoms. Morfeld, who also tested negative, said he planned to remain in the balcony until Monday.

Making his points: Omaha Sen. Justin Wayne continued a strategy Wednesday used often by the

legislature's most senior member, Sen. Ernie Chambers, by filing several amendments to bills in an attempt to grind progress on bills to a halt. At one point, Wayne said he planned to take up the rest of the session with his filibuster.

"Time is on our side," sang Chambers, voicing the words of a Rolling Stones song. He used the song to explain that slowing down the process can make one lawmaker very powerful at the end of a session, when time is short to pass bills.

Wayne used his repeated turns on the microphone to discuss cases of racial injustice, educate fellow senators about the economic disparities in his northeast Omaha district and bemoan the lack of action on those issues.

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Diana Duran | *DHHS Advocate*
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services

OFFICE: 402-471-6035 | FAX: 402-471-3996

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