From: Shelburn, Andrew
To: Shelburn, Andrew
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 9-6-22
Date: Tuesday, September 6, 2022 9:09:34 AM

AG VALLEY CO-OP

Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Aug 2022	7.09	44.00	08:12
Corn	Oct 2022	6.60	-5.00	08:12
Milo	Aug 2022	6.30	-35.00	08:12
Milo	Oct 2022	6.05	-60.00	08:12
Soybeans	Aug 2022	13.73	-45.00	08:10
Soybeans	Oct 2022	13.53	-65.00	08:10
Wheat	Aug 2022	8.12	-75.00	08:08
Wheat	Jul 2023	7.98	-80.00	07:59

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NCN: Slama, Herbster court case moving to October
NPM: 'It's not for everyone.' How Midwestern states tempt tourists with unpretentious getaways

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GII: NEBRASKA STATE FAIR: Ricketts meets with fairgoers, local business owners

Gov. Pete Ricketts visited the Nebraska State Fair Friday.
Through the day Ricketts toured the fairgrounds, met with fairgoers, visited with business owners and dined with the Nebraska Cattlemen's Association.
"The State Fair as always is great," Ricketts told The Independent. "It's an opportunity to be able to highlight our state's No. 1 industry, agriculture. We've got beautiful weather. It's going to be a great day."

An absolute must for the governor while at the fair is visiting the Beef Pit, he shared.
"The Beef Pit is always a must-do. You've got to get to the Beef Pit," he said. "And I've got to go find pork belly on a stick. I've got to track that one down!"
An advocate for "Buy Nebraska," Ricketts said the State Fair is a great showcase for the state's many products.
"You see a lot of Nebraska vendors around here," he said. "There's also a lot of craftspeople. You have woodworkers, people who are quilting, bakers. You have so many people who bring their unique talents to the State Fair. It's a great chance to be able to connect with them, and really get great Nebraska products."
Nebraska State Fair particularly highlights the state's great agriculture, said Ricketts.
"It gives people an opportunity to see what great care our producers take of the land and their animals," he said. "This is a big deal for the producers who bring their animals in. These young people get to show off what they've been able to do over the course of the year."
It is also an opportunity for people who don't have that connection to the farm or ranch to be able to make that connection, said Ricketts.
"My mom grew up on a farm, so I remember when I was growing up we would go to grandpa's farm, but my kids don't have that experience," he said. "More and more Nebraskans don't have that direct connection to agriculture. This is an opportunity for them to see what it means to be an agricultural producer, what they do, what's their lifestyle, how they raise the animals."
He added, "Food doesn't come from a store. It comes from the hard work of our producers here in the state."
Nebraska Cattlemen Association Board President Brenda Masek said the day's lunch with Ricketts went very well.
"Usually the governor always takes a day to come to the State Fair, to the Beef Pit here, and eat with us," she said.
Masek applauded Ricketts' efforts on behalf of Nebraska's producers.
"We've been very, very pleased with the work he's done for agriculture in this state over the last eight years," she said. "He's taught himself about agriculture. Being from big business, not coming from an agriculture background, he has really understood what the major economic engine in this state is."
The Beef Pit is receiving many visitors this year, said Masek.
"We were 200 sandwiches ahead for yesterday, which is really good," she said. "The last few years, with COVID and all the setbacks it's been pretty slim for the Beef Pit and everything in the state fair. This year is looking good."
To see the Nebraska State Fair gatebook and daily schedules, visit statefair.org/gatebook-daily-schedules.
By Brandon Summers

AP: Director of Nebraska prisons system announces retirement

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska Department of Correctional Services Director Scott Frakes, who has

headed the state's embattled prison system for the past seven years, has announced he is resigning effective next month.
The announcement was made Thursday in a news release, and Frakes said his last day will be Oct. 7. State Fire Marshal Chris Cantrell also announced in the same release his resignation, effective Oct. 14. Gov. Pete Ricketts will announce interim directors to serve in both offices.
Frakes was appointed by Ricketts to the post in early 2015 to help fix high-profile problems in the state's prison system, but has struggled in the years since with chronic prison overcrowding and staff shortages. He had been on the job less than three months when a prisoner revolt broke out at the state's maximum security prison in Tecumseh that left two prisoners dead and two others and two staff members injured.
Frakes also received blistering criticism from state lawmakers and others later that year for spending more than $54,000 on foreign-made lethal injection drugs the state never received because the federal government declared them illegal and blocked their importation.

LJS: Rural health care challenges confront next Legislature

The health care challenge in rural Nebraska is growing more critical for its aging residents.
During the past three years, 46 long-term care facilities in Nebraska have closed and most of them were in small rural towns, Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon pointed out in his latest weekly legislative update.
Seventy-five percent of Nebraska's 71 rural hospitals "utterly depend on Medicare or Medicaid funding to keep the doors open," the senator said.
Several counties in western Nebraska have the highest percentage in the state of people 65 and older who are living alone, Brewer noted.
"In the Sandhills communities there is an acute shortage of licensed practical nurses," he says. "This causes a much higher nurse-to-patient ratio than found in any other part of the state."
All of that no doubt is an impetus for older rural Nebraskans to move into larger communities where quality health care can be immediately accessed.
That certainly must be one factor in Lincoln's dramatic growth as the city approaches 300,000. The 2020 census pegged population of Lincoln's metropolitan area at 340,217 now.
"Historically, life in western Nebraska has always come with hardship," Brewer said.
But growing rural health care challenges are an issue that needs to be addressed when the next session of the Legislature convenes in January, he said.

* * *

Mikhail Gorbachev, a towering historic figure.
He really, truly, actually changed the world.
How many leaders can say that?
Gorbachev is far more appreciated in America than in Russia today because of the collapse of the Soviet Union on his watch. Vladimir Putin is trying to recapture Ukraine today.
I wonder who the United States would have sent to Gorbachev's funeral if the invasion of Ukraine had not shut down the U.S.-Russian relationship.
That would have been a challenging diplomatic decision, one that would have called for some restraint.

Former presidents? Under today's circumstances, probably not.
Gorbachev came to Lincoln in 2002 to address the E. N. Thompson Forum on World Issues at the Lied Center.
And he left with an honorary degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that was awarded to him by Chancellor Harvey Perlman during the event.
The crowd passed on a unique opportunity to chant "Go Big Red."
Open and engaging, Gorbachev told an amusing tale about how Russian citizens became increasingly annoyed by the long lines they had to endure to purchase retail goods during the challenging economic times while he was in charge.
Perhaps especially so when he placed a limit on alcohol.
Infuriated by the long line he had to wait in to purchase vodka, Gorbachev said, one Russian angrily left and vowed to go immediately to the Kremlin and kill Gorbachev.
When he returned home much later that day, the exasperated man said he had failed to get the job done because that line was even longer, Gorbachev said, completing the joke at his own expense.
Summing up his career, Gorbachev said: "I took the blows and I continued with my policy."
Sounds like Sinatra: "I did it my way."

* * *

Finishing up:
* Nebraska Democrats have changed the name of their Morrison-Exon fundraising dinner celebration to the Kerrey-Nelson Gala in honor of Nebraska's most recent Democratic governors and U.S. senators. This year's event will be held in Omaha on Oct. 14.
* Two debates have been scheduled between the House candidates in Nebraska's sharply competitive 2nd District. Republican Rep. Don Bacon and state Sen. Tony Vargas, the Democratic nominee, will meet in a traditional Omaha Press Club lunch hour debate on Oct. 13 and then on Oct. 16 at a 6 p.m. debate hosted by KETV.
* Cameron the celebrity cat has returned to his Capitol neighborhood home after an unexpected overnight at the Humane Society. He's presumably ready to preside once again over his Capitol domain where he generously makes himself available for personal attention -- until someone else shows up with treats.
* The scheduled October departure of Scott Frakes as director of the state's Department of Correctional Services opens up one of the most important and sensitive leadership posts in state government with Gov. Pete Ricketts positioned to make the appointment of a new prisons director prior to the arrival of a new governor in January.
* Great story in Sunday's newspaper by Jenna Thompson about the ongoing plight of meatpacking workers in Nebraska. The heavily immigrant workforce is vital to the state's ag-powered economy.
By Don Walton

LJS: Will there be sports wagering in Nebraska anytime soon? Don't bet on it

Nebraska's first racetrack casino is poised to open later this month in Lincoln.
The temporary WarHorse Casino set up in the horse racing simulcast building at Lincoln Race Course

will have 433 slot machines. It won't have table games, though, as officials say there isn't enough room.
Another thing it won't have is sports betting.
The gambling ballot measures that gained overwhelming support from Nebraska voters in November 2020 not only authorized casinos in the state, they also opened the door to betting on sporting events.
And when the Legislature in spring 2021 established the framework for casino gambling in the state, the law included provisions for sports betting.
But while rules for casino gaming were finalized earlier this year, the rule-making process for sports betting hasn't even begun.
Tom Sage, director of the Nebraska Racing and Gaming Commission, said sports betting will go through a separate rule-making process before the commission, just like casino gaming did.
That means a public hearing and commission vote, followed by a review by the state Attorney General's office and approval by the governor's office.
Sage said proposed rules for sports betting have been created and the industry was allowed to analyze them and make comments and suggestions. Those comments have been addressed, and the rules are tentatively scheduled to go before the Racing and Gaming Commission for a public hearing Oct. 21.
It took about five months for casino rules to be approved by the governor after the Racing and Gaming Commission voted on them in December, so if the process takes the same amount of time, that would mean sports betting rules could be in place by March or April of next year.
Sage declined to speculate on whether the timeline for approval will be the same, shorter or longer than it was for casino gambling.
The timeline means that at best, sports wagering will be available in Nebraska about 2 1/2 years after voters approved it.
Contrast that to Kansas, where sports betting began Thursday, just a few months after the state legislature approved it.
But Kansas had a couple of advantages over Nebraska. One, it already has casinos, so it didn't have to create new rules for gambling. Two, the Kansas law allows mobile sports betting.
The Nebraska Legislature chose to require that all sports betting occur in person at Nebraska casinos, which Sage said is "the biggest reason" that it's taken so long for sports betting to get going in Nebraska.
Because all betting must occur in person in a casino, there was no reason to craft rules for sports betting until there were casinos in the state, he said.
"We could have had sports wagering rules (already), but we would have had no place to have sports wagering," Sage said.
Whenever the rules for sports betting are approved, WarHorse will be ready to take bets.
"The moment that sports betting is approved in the state of Nebraska, we will offer it," said Lynne McNally, CEO of the Nebraska Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association, which is partnering to open the WarHorse Casinos in Lincoln and Omaha.
McNally said sports betting will be added to the temporary casino in Lincoln once it becomes available. A temporary casino is not scheduled to open in Omaha until late in 2023, so it will likely have sports betting from the start.
It's not clear yet what the plans are at Fonner Park, which hopes to have a temporary casino open in Grand Island by Thanksgiving.

Sharon Haselhoff, a regional vice president with Elite Casino Resorts, Fonner's partner in the casino, said the company operates sports books at casinos in Iowa and Colorado and plans on having one in Grand Island "in accordance with the rule-making by the commission."
"We are awaiting to see what the final rules will be for sports wagering," she said.
McNally said she appreciated Gov. Pete Ricketts' timely approval of the casino rules once they had been voted on by the commission and vetted by the attorney general.
"So I'm hoping the process goes as quickly for sports betting," she said.
Depending on the timing, it's likely it will be a new governor, either Republican Jim Pillen or Democrat Carol Blood, who makes that decision.
One thing that will need to be clarified through the rule-making process is what steps casinos will have to take to add sports betting once the rules are approved.
Sage said he believes it could be a simple process that involves an administrative approval by his office, or commission members could decide they want to approve each sports betting operation.
By Matt Olberding

LJS: Exclusive: Inmates say Patrick Schroeder killed himself on Nebraska's death row

Fellow inmates say death row inmate Patrick Schroeder killed himself Monday, after attempting suicide earlier this month.
The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services confirmed the 45-year-old's death at the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution in a news release.
But it declined to provide any details of his death, saying the cause hadn't yet been determined and that a grand jury would later be called to review it.
In emails from death row, John Lotter and Aubrey Trail confirmed that a week or two prior to his death Schroeder had cut his wrist and arm with a razor deeply enough to nick an artery and require several stitches.
Lotter said Schroeder was returned to his cell on death row within two days, with only a razor restriction. He thinks Schroeder shouldn't have been returned so soon, given his frame of mind.
Early Monday, Lotter woke at about 1:30 a.m. to the sound of a correctional officer hitting Schroeder's cell door and calling out his name. When he didn't get a response, the guard called on the radio to have his cell, D11, opened, he said.
Soon after, Lotter said he heard what sounded like CPR being administered to Schroeder. A few minutes later, Schroeder was wheeled past Lotter's cell with a guard still doing CPR on him. But it was clear he was already dead, Lotter said.
Lotter said he heard later that Schroeder hung himself with a sheet.
Trail said prison officials kept Schroeder in the mental health unit for less than 24 hours.
"And then this," he said. "Everybody here is just like 'WTF,' He still had the stitches in his arm from last attempt."
Johnson County Attorney Rick Smith, who was appointed to be a county court judge two weeks ago, said Schroeder's death remains under investigation, so he couldn't predict when a grand jury may be called to review it.

Doug Koebernick, Inspector General of the Nebraska Correctional System, said the prison notified his office the day of Schroeder's death and his office started its own investigation.
Unlike a grand jury, which looks at whether criminal charges should be filed against anyone in connection with the death, the inspector general's office will be focused on Schroeder's death, the events that surrounded it and whether staff followed prison policies.
"If you're on death row or not, everyone should be treated the same," Koebernick said.
Schroeder is the fifth death row inmate in 15 years to die while awaiting execution by the state.
Arthur Gales, 55, died last year of cancer. In 2015, Michael Ryan, 66, died of natural causes. David Dunster, 56, died of a health-related issue in 2011, and Roger Bjorklund, 39, of a heart attack in 2006.
Eleven men remain on Nebraska's death row.
Suzanne Gage, a spokeswoman for the Nebraska Attorney General's Office, said each of the 11 inmates are at various stages of state and federal court challenges to their death sentences.
And the Supreme Court previously has ruled that an execution warrant cannot be issued when there are pending court challenges by a death row inmate.
When asked last week if the prison has been actively seeking the drug protocol needed to carry out an execution here, spokeswoman Laura Strimple said it is the responsibility of the state Corrections Department to carry out the order of the court, "which includes continuing to pursue procuring the necessary substances."
She did not elaborate where the prison is in the process.
Nebraska's last execution occurred in 2018, when Carey Dean Moore, 60, was put to death for the 1979 deaths of Omaha cab drivers Reuel Van Ness Jr. and Maynard Helgeland.
He had been on death row 38 years.
Schroeder had been 11 years into a life sentence for the killing of 75-year-old Pawnee City farmer Kenny Albers when on April 15, 2017, he strangled his cellmate, Terry Berry, because Berry wouldn't stop talking.
Schroeder pleaded guilty to the crime and didn't fight the death sentence.
By Lori Pilger

Nebraska Examiner: Nebraska Attorney General now says he'll explore whether the state was a victim of fraud in Saint Francis contract

LINCOLN – Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson indicated Friday he will evaluate the state's legal options in pursuing funds that may have been fraudulently spent via the state's contract with a Kansas foster care provider.
Peterson responded to a request by State Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha to explore whether Saint Francis Ministries defrauded the State of Nebraska during its failed child welfare contract.
Contract ended
The state severed its contract with Saint Francis in December 2021, after the organization failed to fulfill its obligations to 2,500 foster children it oversaw in eastern Nebraska. The failure came despite

an additional $110 million in emergency funding from the state.
The request Thursday by Cavanaugh, who has led criticism of the contract with Kansas-based Saint Francis, comes on the heels of revelations by Kansas Reflector.
Kansas Reflector recently reported the FBI moved to seize assets of a subcontractor of Saint Francis, WMK Research, and its owner, William Whymark, after it was discovered that Whymark had submitted millions of dollars of fraudulent invoices to Saint Francis. The invoices inflated Whymark's expenses as well as the information technology work he claimed to have performed.
Cavanaugh said Nebraska, in the interest of its taxpayers, needs to explore if it was also a victim of fraud and whether it should be pursuing reimbursement of funds it spent.

Appreciates response

The senator said she appreciated the response from the attorney general.
"They gave me a response fairly quickly," Cavanaugh said Friday. "I'm hopeful that means they agree that there's something worth looking into."
A spokeswoman for Peterson had declined to comment on Thursday.
But in an email to Cavanaugh on Friday, Peterson said he would "sit down with a team of lawyers to evaluate our legal options" based on the recent information.
Cavanaugh said it's particularly important that the Attorney General's Office explore this issue before Peterson, who did not seek reelection, leaves office in January.

Saint Francis sues

Saint Francis, the largest foster care provider in Kansas, has sued its former leadership, alleging they hid the misspending of millions of dollars from its board of directors.
Federal investigators, in court documents, have identified nearly $11 million in billing to Sant Francis as probably fraudulent.
Saint Francis Ministries has taken issue with an Aug. 12 story by Kansas Reflector, calling portions of it "inaccurate" and "false." But Saint Francis would not, when asked, identify specific statements in question.
By Paul Hammel

OWH: Nebraska lawmaker seeks investigation of possible fraud by former child welfare contractor

LINCOLN — A Nebraska lawmaker wants a state probe of allegedly fraudulent dealings within the Kansas-based nonprofit that formerly managed Omaha-area child welfare cases.
State Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha sent a letter Thursday to Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson, asking him to take action on behalf of Nebraska taxpayers and the child welfare system.
Specifically, she requested that Peterson file a legal motion requiring that St. Francis Ministries, the organization's former CEO Robert Smith and the information technology company WMK Research preserve any evidence related to St. Francis' contract with Nebraska.
She also requested that he ask the Nebraska State Patrol to launch an investigation into Nebraska's dealings with the three entities.
St. Francis Ministries won a five-year, $197 million contract from the Nebraska Department of Health

and Human Services to oversee the care of abused and neglected children in Douglas and Sarpy Counties in July 2019 after bidding 40% less than the previous contractor.

But the Kansas entity's tenure was troubled from the start. Costs escalated, while the agency never met caseload standards set by Nebraska law and continually fell short on other contract requirements. In December 2021, Nebraska officials announced an early termination of the contract.

The nonprofit's financial problems began surfacing in October 2020, when its two officials were removed following a whistleblower's report. An internal investigation into financial mismanagement followed.

Among other things, the investigation reported a "potential conflict of interest" between Smith and Bill Whymark, the president of WMK Research of Mount Kisco, New York. The report said Whymark had been hired to write a new suite of software for the agency but that no software had been delivered in a year.

The investigation also said said that Whymark billed for an "improbable amount of time" and that Smith spent a few minutes or less to review thousands of dollars of invoices from him.

Last month, the Kansas Reflector reported that federal prosecutors had moved to seize $700,000 in a civil asset forfeiture case alleging that Whymark had defrauded St. Francis by submitting falsified invoices.

According to the online news outlet, an FBI agent said in court filings that there was probable cause to believe Whymark engaged in a multiyear scheme netting $10.73 million from St. Francis Ministries.

Cavanaugh cited those reports in her request to the attorney general. She said she was "specifically concerned over the fact that Nebraska was also defrauded by St. Francis Ministries, but we have not taken an action to recoup those monies."

The Attorney General's Office declined to comment on the letter. St. Francis did not respond to a request for comment.

HHS records show that Nebraska paid St. Francis a total of $175 million for managing cases from October 2019 through April 2022.

That includes $28 million paid during the transition back to state case management and payments made under an emergency contract signed in January 2021. The 25-month, $147.3 million contract replaced the first contract and erased the original 40% cost difference.

Nebraska officials signed the emergency contract after then-interim St. Francis CEO William Clark said the nonprofit could not continue operating without increased reimbursement.

He said the agency expected to lose about $27 million in its first full year on the Nebraska contract.

He also said the entity had used $10 million from contracts with the State of Kansas to cover shortfalls in the Nebraska contract.

He blamed the recently removed leaders for underbidding the Nebraska contract, which led to a financial crisis within the nonprofit.

By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Nebraska child welfare system taking alternative approach with more troubled families

LINCOLN — The situation sounded bad. Children missing school day after day. Roaches crawling throughout the home. Parents wary and uncooperative with the child welfare worker who showed up at their door.

It could have resulted in the Lincoln parents being charged with child abuse and neglect, their children being removed from home, and the court ordering the parents to meet several requirements to get their kids back and end state oversight.

That's been the usual approach to child abuse and neglect cases in Nebraska.

But in this case, state officials used a different, less adversarial approach called "alternative response." Under that approach, the child welfare worker learned enough about the family to feel confident the children were safe, then offered to help the parents find solutions to their struggles.

Over time, the worker helped the family find roach-free housing and connect with local charities for furniture. The worker found money to help over the holidays and encouraged the parents' efforts to build a better relationship with the school. Meanwhile, the father got a new and better job.

By the time the worker bowed out of their lives, the family was in a much better situation without ending up on the state's child abuse registry or having a court record.

Nebraska child welfare officials launched alternative response as a pilot project in 2014. The approach was used in 72 cases that year. It has been growing ever since.

Last year, for the first time ever, the state handled more child abuse and neglect cases through alternative response than were substantiated and handled through the traditional process.

In fact, the latest Child Abuse and Neglect Annual Data Report shows that alternative response was used in 4,089 cases in 2021, more than double the number in the year before and nearly twice the number of substantiated cases going the traditional route.

State Sen. John Arch of La Vista, the chairman of the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee, said the growth of alternative response appears to be good news for children and families.

"It's a positive for the families, as long as we're making sure it's used correctly," he said. "If there's a way that we can prevent a child from having to be removed from home and go into foster care, that's a good thing."

Juliet Summers, executive director for Voices for Children in Nebraska, said the organization has long advocated for alternative response. She said removing children from their families causes trauma, even when removal is necessary for safety. Nebraska has a history of removing children from their families at higher rates than most other states.

"How much better for our agency and state to give assistance rather than compiling trauma," she said. "We just have to make sure children don't slip through the cracks."

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, in a statement, called the approach "a useful tool to aid in addressing the diverse needs of families."

"Alternative response is family-centered and focuses on building upon the family's strengths and supporting them in developing strong supportive networks so that they are able to have the protective factors needed to ensure their children are safe and well," the statement said.

But Monika Gross, executive director for the Foster Care Review Office, was more guarded. She said child welfare research generally shows alternative response as beneficial by helping families early and staving off worse problems.

"On the other hand, I think there's a lot of things we don't know about alternative response," she said.

The unanswered questions include how many cases start out as alternative response but have to be

moved into traditional response because of concerns about child safety, and how many families go through alternative response and end up being reported again for child abuse or neglect, she said.
Gross is co-chairing a Nebraska Children's Commission advisory committee looking into Nebraska's use of alternative response. She said there is no outside oversight of those cases, such as the Foster Care Review Office does for foster care cases.
However, an evaluation of the alternative response pilot program done by the Center on Children, Families and the Law at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln found generally positive outcomes from the approach. The center compared cases that were randomly assigned to alternative response with similar cases that were assigned to the traditional route.
In a 2020 report, the center reported that alternative response families were less likely than traditional approach families to be reported again for abuse or neglect. They were less likely to have those reports substantiated or to have a child removed.
The evaluation also found that alternative response children showed improvements in emotional symptoms, hyperactivity and conduct problems while their parents learned more about effective parenting and child development and about the social and emotional development of children.
The numbers of cases handled with alternative response has been increasing since the evaluation period ended. State officials said 2021 marked the first year that all cases eligible for alternative response were handled with that approach.
Changes in the criteria used to rule out cases for alternative response also contributed to the growth.
HHS started out using more than 20 factors to disqualify cases, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse to the head or torso or neglect of a child that results in serious bodily injury. Cases involving additional factors, such as domestic violence or alcohol abuse, must undergo a special review to qualify.
The disqualifying factors have changed as the state gains more experience with alternative response. The current factors are spelled out in a state law passed in 2020.
While alternative response cases have increased, the number of child abuse and neglect cases substantiated by state workers has remained relatively steady in recent years. Since 2015, it has hovered around 2,100. The number dipped to 1,903 in 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic but rebounded to 2,080 in 2021.
HHS officials noted, in a statement, that the number of calls to the state child abuse and neglect hotline dropped during the first year of the pandemic because schools were closed and children spent more time at home. However, fewer cases were determined to be unfounded.
Summers said calls during that time may have come from family and friends familiar with a situation, rather than school officials or health care workers, who have more limited knowledge.
Nebraska law requires anyone who encounters a case of suspected child abuse or neglect to report it to the state. The goal is to make sure cases are not missed, but it can result in a larger proportion of unfounded reports.
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Newly approved Nebraska math standards put greater emphasis on data, statistics

Revised math standards for Nebraska public schools approved Friday will put extra emphasis on data and statistics, state officials say.
The standards also aim to make sure middle school students are ready for algebra I in high school by increasing their understanding of ratios, proportional reasoning and arithmetic of rational numbers.
Members of the Nebraska State Board of Education approved the standards, which are being described as a revision and not a rewrite of the previous standards approved in 2015.
Standards are a list of knowledge and skills that state officials expect students to learn in a given content area.
It's up to districts to select the curriculum to teach the standards.
Under state law, school districts must, within a year, adopt the standards or their own set of standards that are at least as rigorous.
The standards adoption comes on the heels of a statewide dip in math proficiency that state officials attribute to the pandemic.
In 2018-19, math proficiency for all tested grades, third through eighth and 11th, was 52%, according to the Nebraska Department of Education.
The following year, testing was suspended because of the pandemic.
Testing resumed in 2020-21, and proficiency that year was 46%.
Officials with the Nebraska Department of Education have been encouraging districts to adopt higher-quality instructional materials, according to Cory Epler, the department's chief academic officer.
Epler has said he expects proficiency to rise in future years as some school districts use federal pandemic relief money to buy new high-quality math curriculum.
Epler said adopting standards is not enough by itself to raise proficiency. Quality instruction is important as well, he said.
By Joe Dejka

OWH: Updated COVID boosters begin to roll out in Omaha; old boosters no longer available

Updated COVID-19 booster shots began going into arms in the Omaha metro area Friday, with many more doses expected to arrive in the weeks to come.
Thursday, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention gave final approval for the new boosters, called bivalent boosters because they offer protection from the two dominant omicron subvariants of COVID-19 — BA.4 and BA.5 — as well as from the original virus.
Kohll's Rx began offering vaccination appointments for a limited supply of the Moderna version of the booster on Friday. It's authorized for people 18 and older. Pharmacy officials said they expect the Pfizer booster, authorized for people 12 and older, to arrive next week.
The approval of the new boosters creates some potential for confusion among people trying to navigate a now more complicated vaccine landscape.
Douglas County health officials said the new boosters are to be given two months after completion of the primary COVID-19 series or the most recent COVID booster dose. Patients can choose either

Moderna or Pfizer for the new boost, regardless of the brand of their previous COVID vaccine doses. However, the new boosters will replace the original boosters for people 12 and older. Therefore, the original boosters no longer will be available for people in that age bracket. Children ages 5 to 11 will continue to get the original booster. Kids under age 5 are not yet eligible for a booster.
CDC officials said in a statement Thursday that they expect to recommend the updated boosters for other pediatric groups. The agency will move quickly to make them available when data is available and the shots are authorized by the Food and Drug Administration.
“The updated COVID-19 boosters are formulated to better protect against the most recently circulating COVID-19 variant,” CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said in a statement. “They can help restore protection that has waned since previous vaccination and were designed to provide broader protection against newer variants.
Walensky said the recommendation followed a “comprehensive scientific evaluation and robust scientific discussion” and urged people to get the booster.
Douglas County health officials urged residents to contact their primary care providers or an area pharmacy for more information about how to schedule their bivalent booster doses.
The Douglas County Health Department has scheduled three clinics to offer Pfizer boosters for people 12 and older. All three clinics are scheduled for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.:
Sept. 10, Girls Inc., 2811 N. 45th St.
Sept. 17, Omaha South High School, 4519 S. 24th St.
Sept. 24, Millard North Middle School, 2828 S. 139th St.
By Julie Anderson

LJS: Meatpacking workers, advocates describe 'dehumanizing' conditions in Nebraska plants

Before Guadalupe Vega Brown moved to Lincoln in 2018, she cut and packaged meat in different Nebraska plants.
Her work involved long days, physically demanding tasks and repetitive motions. After handling a knife for 10 hours, she’d come home tired and sore, pulling off her shoes with aching hands. It was hard work, she said — but that’s not what bothered her about her job.
Vega Brown said life in those steel, windowless plants is worse than she thinks most people know.
This summer, the Journal Star interviewed Vega Brown and five current workers from three different Nebraska meatpacking plants. Many utilized a translator. Pseudonyms of the five workers, who wished not to be named because they feared losing their jobs, are noted with asterisks.
Smithfield allowed the Journal Star to tour its Crete facility and held a roundtable discussion between the reporter and nine Smithfield employees — three corporate employees, the general and assistant manager, and several plant workers. The plant contributes to Nebraska’s multibillion dollar meat industry, processing about 1 million pounds of meat per day and feeding an estimated 30-40 million people every week.
Vega Brown and the anonymous meat processors were introduced to the Journal Star through Nebraska Appleseed, an organization that advocates for plant workers and connects with close to 600 meatpackers each year through safety seminars and community partners. The group has been in

operation since 1996, helping educate workers about their rights and making the public aware of conditions inside meatpacking plants.
Each of the six meatpacking workers voiced concerns about frequent injuries, hazardous working conditions, discrimination and harassment in their workplace.
Darcy Tromanhauser, program director of immigrants and communities with Nebraska Appleseed, said their stories are common.
She believes the meatpacking industry stands in the way of a decades-long, hard-fought struggle for meatpacking workers' rights.
"Over many years, so many workers have worked hard to tell this story," Tromanhauser said. "And yet so many people are surprised to hear that this is going on."

'It's constant injuries that we have to face'

Every day, around 26,600 Nebraska workers, many of whom are immigrants, head to work in meatpacking plants across the state. Vega Brown was one of them.
Work was fast, she said. The more tasks they could complete, the more money the company made. So, the conveyor belt flew.
She recalled a time on the line, frantically trying to manage the pork zipping by, when a sharp pain shot through her neck.
Vega Brown screamed "Help me! I can't move." But her supervisor told her she needed to get back on the line.
"What are you doing? Get back to work!" Vega Brown said, imitating the woman with raised arms.
Vega Brown lay on the ground, writhing in pain, as work continued around her. A few coworkers who stopped to help were scolded by their supervisor. An ambulance was on its way, they were told. Nothing to see here.
"For me, that was the most dehumanizing thing that's ever happened to me," she said with tears in her eyes. "Sometimes I think I've moved past it, but knowing others are still going through the same thing makes it feel as if it's just happened."
Vega Brown was hospitalized for three days after her injury. Her plant had a penalty point system that allotted employees 15 points before termination. She received two penalty points for every day she was in the hospital.
When she argued that she shouldn't have been penalized for being hospitalized, her bosses told her it didn't matter. She wasn't at work. Six points.
Andy* — a meatpacking worker who's been employed in Nebraska for nearly two decades — said the industry takes advantage of immigrant employees like himself.
The white-coated workers with knives hurry to keep up, often at the expense of injuring themselves. But Andy's employers don't like it when people complain.
"In my experience, when people get hurt, the company tries to terminate (them)," he said.
So, they stay on the line, keep quiet, and keep cutting. Even if it's painful.
Have things changed much since he first started? "No," Andy said. "Not really."
Is there one company that's better to work for? "It's all kinda the same," he said.
Why doesn't he complain? "HR doesn't do anything."
Andy said he feels stuck. Life in the plant is grim, but opportunities in rural Nebraska for people who don't speak English fluently are few and far between. So, Andy and others keep working, hoping one day things will change.
In Sara's* plant, she must finish more than six pieces per minute. The pressure to operate at a machine-like pace is painful, and the equipment she uses is old, unstable and unsafe, she said.

She wishes they could work at a more comfortable speed, but supervisors keep things moving, moving, moving, even when the plant is short on staff.
“It's constant injuries that we have to face because of the conditions in the plant,” she said. “We all feel defeated, but because of the lack of workers we are expected to continue the same production value. If there are people with more time on their hands, they're expected to work even harder, even though they are beating up their bodies to do it.”
Tim* works at a different plant in Nebraska, but he also processes pigs.
On the kill floor, Tim said injuries are common. The mechanism that suspends the over 400-pound pigs by their hind feet is transporting them quickly and sometimes things go wrong, he said.
He said he’s seen a couple of his coworkers being whisked away to the nurse after a pig fell on top of them.
Tim said that when injured workers are able, they keep working out of fear of retaliation, but others are taken to the nursing station.
“They'll be given an ibuprofen or something for the pain, and they'll just be taken back to the line,” he said.
Eric Reeder, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union in Omaha, said there are different line speed standards for industries depending on what the product is — line speed is measured differently for pork than it is for chicken, beef, etc. — but it’s easy for supervisors on the floor to turn the line speed up past a safe rate.
Furthermore, what constitutes a safe line speed depends on how many workers are on the line that day. This makes it hard for a standard speed to work well for every plant.
Reeder said he hears complaints of supervisors setting the line speed to an unworkable rate often. At times, plants exceed speeds agreed to by the union.
Smithfield, however, told the Journal Star in a written statement that it’s unlikely workers in their plants are sent back to the line after being injured. Such actions are against the company’s policy.
The company also denies ever going over maximum line speeds. It mentioned its opposition to a USDA-led pilot program to increase line speeds, stating it considers worker safety a priority.
“Line speeds at our harvest facilities never exceed the maximum USDA-approved rate of 1,106 head per hour,” the written statement read. “In fact, our line speeds often operate at significantly lower rates based on staffing levels at any given time.”

'They can’t go to the bathroom, so they pee their pants'

Several workers told the Journal Star that, because of the plants’ urgency to keep the line moving, they’re frequently denied bathroom breaks by their employers.
Both Nebraska Appleseed and Reeder said they’ve also heard persistent complaints about lack of bathroom access from workers in Nebraska plants.
“They’re not letting me go to the bathroom,” Andy told the Journal Star. He recounted stories of his coworkers’ embarrassment after being unable to wait until the end of the day.
A supervisor told Andy’s team to wear diapers if they couldn’t “hold it.”
“A lot of people pee on the line,” he said. “They can’t go to the bathroom, so they pee their pants.”
Before Vega Brown could relieve herself, she’d have to ask a coworker to cover for her. If someone was able to take over her station, time spent on bathroom breaks was taken out of her lunch break.
But Smithfield’s Chief Administrative Officer Kiera Lombardo said employees in the company’s plants are free to relieve themselves whenever they need.
“Nobody is denied access to the restroom,” Lombardo said. “Ever.”
Victor* called working conditions in his plant “horrible” and said he had safety concerns.

A few months ago, Victor said, his plant had an ammonia leak from its refrigeration system, but his supervisors didn't want to stop the line. Instead, employees continued to work while their bosses clamored to fix the issue.
According to the Centers for Disease Control, ammonia exposure can cause nausea, vomiting and burns to the respiratory tract.
"They didn't sound the alarm," Victor said.

'Meatpacking companies are never going to make it to heaven'

According to the USDA, Nebraska led the nation in the number of cattle slaughtered in 2021 and ranks sixth in pork slaughter.
At the heart of this massive operation are people like Andy — immigrant workers trying to provide for their families.
Tromanhauser with Nebraska Appleseed said she's heard alarming stories for years. Plants with poor working conditions thrive because workers feel powerless to improve their situation, she said.
"It's an industry with extreme retaliation," Tromanhauser said. "If people even try to just internally raise a safety concern, they're told, 'There's the door if you want to leave.'"
Gloria Sarmiento, a community organizer with Nebraska Appleseed, said abuse in meat processing plants is an industry-wide issue.
"Sometimes, when they are telling me a story, I want to cry with them," Sarmiento said. "They complain from every company."
The Nebraska Farmers Union began to work with meatpacking employees after a 2020 investigation by Congress found that meatpacking companies ignored COVID-19 infections in order to continue operating. This, coupled with close quarters, led to widespread outbreak and death.
Since then, John Hansen, president of the Nebraska Farmers Union, has advocated for the proper care of workers.
Meatpacking plants' misdeeds are two-fold, Hansen said. While their conditions hurt workers, packing plants also harm farmers. The companies' non-competitive practices threaten smaller-scale operations, Hansen said, leading to more consolidation and fewer farmers.
According to the North American Meat Institute, the four largest companies conduct 70% of beef production.
"Based on how they treat workers, farmers and ranchers, I would say that there's a very good chance that meatpacking companies are never going to make it to heaven," Hansen said.
Reeder and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which represents around 12,000 plant workers in Nebraska, strive to create fair contracts between the workers and employers.
Plant workers act as stewards and report to the union when there have been contract violations, such as line speeds, intimidation or abuse.
However, Reeder said, unionizing the plants is sometimes a challenge. Around 75% of plant members must be in favor of joining before the union will get involved, and there's often pushback from plants once they hear whispers of unionizing.
It's not uncommon for plant heads to call meetings and tell workers not to speak with the union. They'll threaten to close the plant if it becomes unionized, or they'll misinform workers about the cost of union dues.
Reeder said some supervisors will tell workers that if they're caught talking to the union, they'll be fired, which is illegal. But many of the immigrant employees don't know their rights and don't always understand how unions could be beneficial, he said.
"Organizing a union gives you a voice and a sense of fairness in the workplace," Reeder said. "The

company would rather have the convenience to do what they want."
Reeder said one of the most common issues the union faces between plants and workers is proper payment.
He hears complaints of workers not receiving correct payment several times a week. Reeder believes the companies take advantage of the fact that a large portion of its workforce might not speak English fluently.
"Figuring out if you are paid properly is difficult," Reeder said. "If English is not your first language, it's impossible."
He said errors in payroll from plants across the state reach millions of dollars — and those are just from complaints union workers hear. Many won't notice or say anything.
Paul Doremus, general manager of Smithfield in Crete, said his facility has established a working relationship with the union.
"If we make a mistake, I want to make sure we correct it," he said.
Jim Monroe, Smithfield's vice president of corporate affairs, said the necessity of meat processing plants is often overlooked. Not only do they provide food to consumers all over the world, but they play a vital role in the economies of major farming and ranching states like Nebraska.
The Department of Homeland Security deemed meat processors essential workers during the pandemic.
"It's one of the reasons we have so much gratitude for our team members," Monroe said.

'They yell at you like you're an animal'

Each of the six workers from the state's meatpacking industry the Journal Star spoke with mentioned being afraid of or intimidated by their supervisors.
Sara said her supervisors tend to yell, but the way her bosses treat workers sometimes depends on the employee's ethnicity.
"My supervisor does have a lot of favoritism towards certain employees," she said. "I know that certain supervisors get along better with people from (the U.S.), and not as much with the Hispanics."
Carmen* said she reported a supervisor to HR, but she was told it was his word against hers.
"I'm scared to have these types of supervisors … because of the way they're acting," she said.
Carmen said some supervisors grope female employees. The workers who relent get certain benefits, like days off. In a separate interview, Sara said workers who have sexual relations with supervisors are favored.
Tromanhauser said she frequently hears allegations of sexual abuse in plants. Independently, Reeder also said he has heard complaints of women being sexually harassed.
Andy said his supervisors yell every day.
In fits of rage, supervisors have threatened Andy's job and called him a "stupid Mexican." They intimidate employees to complete tasks even if they're unable.
"They yell at you like you're an animal," he said. "They think they are smart, and we are stupid because we use a knife."
When workers at his plant try to complain about their bosses' behavior, they're asked to leave.
"It's sad to see what's going on," he said. "If you try to go to HR, and say, 'This supervisor intimidated and yelled at me,' they'll say, 'Oh, you know what? You don't want to work, so you get out of here.'"
Vega Brown said she felt some of her supervisors were racist.
"They'd say, 'You wanted to work — work. You wanted to go north. This is the north. Work!'"
When the Occupational Safety and Health Administration comes for regular inspections —

announced or not — Tim said conditions improve.
Supervisors are nicer and the line slows to a much more reasonable pace.
“Sometimes the supervisors know when OSHA is coming … So they try to make sure everything's looking good,” he said. “Or if they can't do it in time, they'll just send everybody to break so that there's no workers while OSHA’s walking around inspecting the plant.”
Lombardo with Smithfield believes the company differs from its competitors because of its culture. She said Smithfield goes out of its way to make sure employees feel valued and cared for, no matter their role.
“Our people really are everything to us,” she said. “They’re not a cost to us. They’re a value to us.”

'We take seriously our role as an employer'

In Nebraska, the largest meatpacking companies are JBS, Cargill, Tyson and Smithfield.
In Smithfield’s Crete plant, roughly 70% of the nearly 1,500 employees are “white hat” processors, or non-lead, hands-on meatpackers. These workers have the same jobs as the six meatpackers the Journal Star spoke with at their respective plants.
A supervisor, line lead, production scheduler and quality control monitor at the Crete plant were at a roundtable employee discussion, and while no white hats were present, all attendees said they were heavily involved in line production.
Each employee at the discussion said they’d had a positive experience with the company. They had all been there for several years. Some, decades. Praises ranged from the familial atmosphere to the generous pay — meat processors at Smithfield start at $21.50 an hour.
Production supervisor Tyler Johnson said the company is extremely safety conscious, and it encourages workers to be in close communication with their bosses about potential concerns.
“I try to do my part to talk to every single person on my line, just to ensure that if something’s wrong or off, that they get the help that they need,” he said. “I stay in pretty good communication with my people.”
Lombardo said Smithfield instituted a “hands up” policy to ensure workers feel empowered to report potential issues or injuries. Raising a hand while on the line is meant to immediately alert supervisors to attend to a problem.
Additionally, she believes workers are well taken care of in every physical and emotional aspect.
On the tour, Smithfield representatives showed the Journal Star its various processing lines — nearly every station except the kill floor. Employees were told ahead of time that the Journal Star would be present, but general manager Doremus said the tour was a proper display of the plant’s daily activity.
Tyson Foods — which has plants in Omaha, Madison, Dakota City and Lexington — provided a written statement that said the company is committed to giving its workers the best environment possible.
“We take very seriously our role as an employer to a large and very diverse workforce and are committed to providing a safe and healthy workplace for all of our team members,” the statement read.
Tyson said it provides many avenues for workers to complain about mistreatment, such as Human Resources, its Employment Compliance Department, or the anonymous Tell Tyson First hotline.
Reeder said some of the companies have been responsive to complaints made through the union. But certain plants are more receptive than others, he said.
And while Reeder works to hold the companies accountable for their practices, it can be difficult for the higher-ups to get a full picture of what’s happening on the line all the time.

“The companies that have the most trouble are the larger factories,” Reeder said. “You've got a small HR team that is trying to manage the plant.”
In response to questions, Cargill provided a written statement. The company boasted of safety programs, like LIFESavers and Human and Organization Performance training, that contribute to the security of workers.
“Our protein plants are operating in compliance with federal safety guidelines, and we work closely with state and local health authorities, as well as union representation, to make sure each plant meets the highest safety standards …” it read in part.
The company further maintained that its code of conduct prohibits any worker mistreatment, and potential misconduct is handled “promptly, fairly and as confidentially as possible.”
JBS, too, provided a written response to the Journal Star’s list of questions. The company statement said its Ethics and Compliance department investigates all allegations and takes the necessary steps to remedy issues.
“We have zero tolerance for abuse, discrimination, intimidation or mistreatment of our team members, and action should be taken immediately if any of these things takes place in our facilities,” the statement read.
'Please, can you help us?'
Some meatpacking workers have hope that things could improve, but others aren’t so sure.
“Unless somebody from the outside is willing to help, I don’t see it getting better,” Victor said.
Andy said he’s not sure if things will improve either. Throughout the many years he’s been a meat processor, things have stayed more or less the same.
But he still hopes legislators will pay attention to the industry's issues.
“Please, can you help us? Can you make some laws to protect us?” he said.
Andy said he felt it was most important for the line speeds to be slowed down. He finds it sometimes impossible to work at the pace his employer requires.
In 1999, former Gov. Mike Johanns created a meatpacking workers’ bill of rights after reading stories published in the Journal Star detailing the plight of employees, but Tromanhauser doesn’t believe much has changed since then.
For now, Carmen, Victor, Andy, Sara and Tim continue to work in what they describe as poor conditions. Vega Brown has moved on from her former employer, but she still struggles with chronic pain as a result of the physical stress she once put on her body.
By speaking out, Andy said he hopes his fellow Nebraskans will begin to understand the challenges he experiences, all to put food on their tables.
“How can we sacrifice people to make all this food?”
Carmen and Victor were interviewed with the help of family members, who assisted with translation. Sara utilized the translation skills of Ruby Mendez Lopez, a bilingual employee with Nebraska Appleseed. Journal Star reporter Evelyn Mejia assisted with the translation of Vega Brown’s interview.
By Jenna Thompson

OWH: Cancer tops heart disease as top cause of death in Nebraska

Nate Metschke was a people person who shared his positivity and love of life with everyone he met. So when the award-winning band director at Neligh-Oakdale High School died at age 40 on Christmas Eve 2018, it hit his family and his community hard.

The year before, they had all celebrated — ringing the school's victory bell — when Metschke was declared free of colon cancer. He had stayed upbeat throughout his treatment, never letting on at school when he didn't feel good and encouraging others to get screened for colon cancer.

But the disease returned, this time attacking his liver. Positive to the end, he died in surgery.

"His students have mentioned to me several times how much they admired his determination and his commitment," said Darcy Metschke, his wife of 14 years. "He just kept teaching."

Metschke became a victim of the disease that in the past decade has emerged as Nebraska's biggest killer.

Cancer narrowly surpassed heart disease as the state's leading cause of death over the past 10 years, according to a World-Herald analysis of data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Nationally, heart disease remains the leading cause of death. But between 2011 and 2020, cancer on average claimed just under 3,500 Nebraskans a year, roughly 50 more than died annually from heart disease.

In the Omaha metro area, cancer consistently has been the leading cause of death for more than a decade, having first overtaken heart disease in 2005.

The good news is that the mortality rates for both diseases have been falling for decades due to healthier habits and advances in prevention and treatment. The biggest factor is a decrease in smoking, which contributes to both cancer and heart disease deaths and still ranks as the leading cause of preventable death.

But compared with cancer death rates, heart disease mortality rates have come down more, a shift cardiologists attribute largely to the decline in smoking and the recognition and treatment of hypertension and high cholesterol.

"The biggest thing isn't that cancer is killing more people, it's that heart disease is killing fewer," said Dr. William Lydiatt, a surgical oncologist with Methodist Estabrook Cancer Center's head and neck oncology clinic. "It's a rather remarkable reduction."

Dr. Edward Peters, professor and chairman of the College of Public Health's epidemiology department at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, said smoking is responsible for a greater proportion of heart disease and heart disease deaths than it is for cancer and cancer-related deaths, so the declines in deaths from smoking appear more substantial in heart disease than in cancer.

Nebraska isn't the only state that has been seeing such a shift. In 2014, cancer deaths exceeded heart disease deaths in 22 states, including Nebraska, according to a 2018 study published by the CDC. That was up from just two states in 2000.

It should be noted, however, that in the last five years, the edge in cancer deaths over heart deaths in Nebraska has been razor-thin.

And with heart deaths recently ticking up in the state, heart disease could one day regain its status as Nebraska's top killer. Regardless, it's clear cancer and heart disease will remain the two biggest threats to Nebraskans' health.

While much of the health care focus in recent years has been on the COVID-19 pandemic, cancer and heart disease still killed far more. During 2020, the virus claimed just over 2,000 lives in the state, according to the CDC, well below the roughly 3,500 for both cancer and heart disease.

Nationally, the pandemic has taken a toll on average life expectancy, which dropped for the second

consecutive year in 2021, according to a government report published Wednesday. The two-year total decline of 2.7 years is the largest in nearly 100 years.
The CDC blamed COVID for about half the decline in 2021. Other contributors were drug overdoses, heart disease, suicide and chronic liver disease.
Health officials also fear the pandemic is likely to ultimately contribute to more deaths from heart disease and cancer. Many people avoided hospitals and clinics during the early part of the pandemic. Some Nebraskans fell behind on routine screenings that, in the case of cancer in particular, are designed to catch diseases while they're still easily treatable and curable.
Locally, health systems have been urging patients to get back in for routine care and screenings. National Cancer Institute modeling of the effect of COVID on cancer screening and treatment for breast and colorectal cancers alone suggests there could be an extra 10,000 deaths in deaths from those tumor types over the next decade.
"They're kind of starting to come back, but we're still seeing a lot of hesitancy from folks," said Andy Link with the American Cancer Society in Nebraska. "They may not be coming back as fast as we'd like them to be to stay healthy."
* * *
When it comes to what's killing Nebraskans today, there's really a Big Two.
For a view on mortality in Nebraska, The World-Herald totaled deaths in the state for the decade ending in 2020, the most recent year for which detailed CDC data is available.
Cancer and heart disease by far ranked as the top two causes of death. The roughly 3,500 annual deaths from each of those diseases were well above those for lung disease, which in the decade killed an average of 1,100 annually. Lung disease was the only other leading cause of death (as defined by the CDC) that averaged more 1,000 deaths a year in Nebraska.
Across the decade, cancer on average killed only about 50 Nebraskans more per year than heart disease.
The death tolls from the two diseases remain so close that in some recent years, more Nebraskans died of heart disease than cancer. In all, cancer deaths have exceeded heart deaths in Nebraska in eight of the past 12 years.
In 2020, just nine more Nebraskans died from cancer than from heart disease. So while cancer ranked No. 1 in the analysis, it's not clear-cut.
But the fact that cancer deaths are now even close to those from heart disease is notable. As recently as 1999, heart disease killed 1,000 more Nebraskans than cancer.
Since that time, the rate of death from heart disease has declined precipitously, down more than 30%. Cancer deaths also are down in that time, but by far less.
UNMC's Peters said that just as the nation decades ago saw leading causes of death shift from infectious diseases to chronic diseases, such as heart disease and cancer, it's now seeing a shift within chronic conditions from heart disease to cancer as the leading cause of death.
The reasons, however, are complex, he said. While much of the recent change can be attributed to smoking (down) and obesity (up), the population also is aging. Advancing age is the most important risk factor for cancer overall and for many individual cancer types, according to the National Cancer Institute.
With cancer becoming the leading killer in more states, a 2016 CDC study projected the United States ultimately would see cancer become the nation's leading killer.
But now that's not nearly so clear. Since 2014, the long-term downward trend in heart disease death rates nationally has reversed, with the rate up almost 10% between 2014 and 2020. The heart death

rate has likewise trended up 4% in Nebraska since that low watermark year.
Iowa is among states that have continuously seen more people die from heart disease than cancer. It has now seen heart deaths trend up 11% in that time.
For most of the 15 leading causes of death, Nebraska's rates are lower than those of the United States. The heart disease rate in Nebraska over the decade was 8% lower. Nebraska's overall cancer rate roughly equals that of the U.S. rate.
But for several causes of death, Nebraskans die at significantly higher rates, most notably lung disease (24% higher), diabetes (35% higher) and Parkinson's disease (28% higher).
COVID shows up among the 15 leading causes over the decade, ranking 13th, even though it existed in only the final year of the 10-year data set. In 2020, 2,043 Nebraska deaths were attributed to the virus, making it the third-leading killer that year after cancer and heart disease.
While some have at times likened COVID to the flu, the COVID deaths that year were almost seven times the number who died from flu and pneumonia. In all, more than 4,400 Nebraskans have died in the 2½-year pandemic.
Two of the leading causes of death in both Nebraska and the nation aren't even tied to disease. Some 800 Nebraskans on average die annually from accidents and roughly 250 from suicide. Accidental deaths are up sharply since 2000, in large part due to a massive increase in accidental overdoses — a product of the nation's opioid epidemic. Accidental deaths resulting from falls also are up, a result of the state's aging population.
* * *
Overall, Nebraska's cancer death rate is similar to the national cancer death rate. But the state over the past five years does have somewhat higher rates of lymphoma and colon cancer and markedly higher rates of leukemia, esophageal, kidney and skin cancer.
Untangling the factors that contribute to particular cancers based on aggregate cancer data, however, is difficult, Peters said. Doing so requires more focused studies looking at exposures and risk factors.
Some of those are underway. Researchers at UNMC and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln have begun looking for possible environmental contributors to Nebraska's higher incidence of childhood cancer. Peters has two ongoing projects in Louisiana and Detroit focused on ovarian and colorectal cancer, funded by the National Institutes of Health, that are looking at the role of environmental stressors as possible contributors to cancer risk.
"The answers are hard to come by when trying to disentangle complex mixtures of exposures," he said.
Dr. Peter Silberstein, chief of hematology/oncology at Creighton University, said it's best to start by looking at the known factors: smoking, obesity, exercise levels, cancer screening rates and cancer risk factors.
"Those are the things that influence cancer rates, and a lot of these are things we can do something about," said Silberstein, also chief of oncology at the Omaha Veterans Administration Hospital.
Lung cancer is by far the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in Nebraska, although rates have fallen significantly. The leading cause, according to the American Lung Association, is smoking.
Silberstein said Nebraska's adult smoking rate is right at the national average of 17%, but the 7% smoking rate for high school students is below the nation's 9%. He said the tax on cigarettes in Nebraska is much lower than it is in many other places in the U.S. Higher taxes, he said, reduce smoking, particularly in teens.
In addition to smoking being down, screening for lung cancer and newer treatments appear to be

making a difference in lung cancer mortality rates.

A study published last year by UNMC's Dr. Apar Ganti found a decrease in the most common type of lung cancer — non-small cell lung cancer — between 2010 and 2017 in the U.S., suggesting that survival increases as lung cancer is diagnosed at earlier stages. Similarly, Methodist lung doctors recently have roughly doubled the number of lung cancers they're catching at the two earliest stages, indicating a shift in the stage at which cancers are found.

Obesity is another known cancer risk factor, Silberstein said. Nebraska's obesity rate went from 11% in 1990 to 34% in 2020, which put it at No. 18 out of the 50 states.

Screenings are a key way to reduce cancer rates, he said. The state is below the national average on mammograms; 65% of Nebraska women 45 and older were up to date on that test in 2018 vs. 68% nationally.

Dr. Garnet Blatchford, chief medical officer with Methodist Health System and a colon/rectal surgeon, said Nebraska also is behind the national screening rate for colon cancer. In 2021, 72.5% of Nebraskans over age 50 reported having had a screening compared with 74.3% of Americans over 50.

But Blatchford said the state is making progress. The gap has narrowed from about 6 percentage points in 2005 to about 2 percentage points in 2021. Treatments have improved, particularly for rectal cancer.

However, an uptick in colon cancer diagnoses and deaths among younger people — such as Metschke, whom Blatchford treated initially — prompted several organizations in 2021 to lower the recommended age for most adults to start that screening from 50 to 45.

Blatchford said she thinks much of that increase, while relatively small, is due to obesity; high-fat, low-fiber diets; and lack of physical activity. But other factors also are being studied, including the role of bacteria and inflammation in the gut. Inflammatory bowel diseases, including Crohn's and colitis, increase the odds of a colon cancer. Several genetic conditions also come into play.

Overall, however, the rate of people being diagnosed with colon or rectal cancer each year has dropped since the mid-1980s, mainly because more people are getting screened and changing their lifestyle-related risk factors, according to the American Cancer Society. Overall colon cancer incidence also has dropped in Nebraska, Blatchford said.

One place the state shines, Silberstein said, is in its vaccination rates for human papillomavirus, or HPV. Nebraska ranked seventh for boys and fifth for girls in 2016. The hope is that vaccination eventually will stop cervical cancer and reduce penile, anal and head and neck cancers, he said.

Said Methodist's Lydiatt of the HPV shot, "It is by far the most significant and important vaccination for cancer prevention."

Darcy Metschke said she doesn't know whether her husband's story would have had a different ending if he'd gone to the doctor sooner.

These days, she's busy teaching fourth grade in the Neligh-Oakdale school system and raising the couple's three children, Madison, 13, Benson, 10, and Ansley, 5. Ansley was born, with the help of an induction, a week before Nate Metschke underwent colon surgery in February 2017. It was about a month after a colonoscopy revealed polyps in his colon.

Friends and family, she said, have been a big help. But she still misses him every day. Even during his treatment, she said, he helped her get through the difficult moments: "He just had the fight in him and the positivity to get him to where he did."

By Julie Anderson

Flatwater Free Press: Skyrocketing absenteeism in Nebraska schools worries teachers, hampers learning

In mid-August, Rhonda Mueller welcomed her 26th class to Elliott Elementary School in central Lincoln. As her new crop of fifth graders filed into the room, she checked off names and listened to the students' excited back-to-school chatter.

The bell rang, and Mueller gazed at her students, arranged in a circle in the middle of the classroom, ready to begin a new year.

There were 21 chairs. One sat empty. On the first day of school, Mueller had her first official absence of the school year.

"How do you go back?" Mueller said. "That was some critical community building that we did those days. The entire class kind of had to take a step back and teach [the absent student], because he can't go on without that....It takes us all back, students, too."

Across Nebraska, a troubling number of school desks have sat empty during the past few years, say experts, teachers and school leaders now trying to fix the issue.

Chronic absenteeism in Nebraska's public schools skyrocketed during COVID-19, according to the most recent statewide data.

Nearly one in five Nebraska students missed at least 10% of days during the 2020-2021 school year, chronic absences that caused many of those students to fall behind academically and socially.

The pandemic has sickened students. It has exacerbated mental health issues. It has also made life harder for many students already living below the poverty line – both things that in turn made missing school more likely.

Now, teachers like Mueller are trying to balance the growing gulf between students who attend regularly, and those who rarely show. And educators and community leaders across Nebraska are searching for ways to rebuild relationships with absent students, while trying to help more families get their children back to school.

"No matter how good your teacher is, no matter how good the system is, if you can't get the student in the seat, there's not a whole lot you can do with them," said David Jespersen, spokesman for the Nebraska Department of Education.

Teachers like Mueller notice the absences in their classrooms every day, observations backed by data from the Nebraska Department of Education.

Overall, Nebraska students missed 6.6% of school days during the school year that ended in May 2021, state data shows. That's up from 5.1% in 2015.

And Nebraska's chronic absenteeism rate jumped by nearly 60 percent during that six-year period.

These student absences affected rural, suburban and urban schools in every corner of the state.

Nearly 38% of Omaha Public Schools students enrolled in the district for at least 10 days were chronically absent during the 2020-2021 school year – meaning they missed at least 10% of school days. More than one in three Ogallala Public Schools students were chronically absent. And nearly a quarter of Ralston Public Schools students missed school chronically as well.

The trends look particularly bad for students from families of low-income as well as students of color.

For example: Ogallala students qualifying for free and reduced lunch had a 48% chronic absenteeism rate during the 2020-2021 school year, roughly double the rate of students not on free and reduced

lunch.
More than half of Native American students in Nebraska were chronically absent that year as well, along with 40% of Black students and 29% of Hispanic students across the state.
School officials around Nebraska say the grinding effects of poverty contribute greatly to student absenteeism.
Joseph Lefdal, principal of Schuyler Central High School, estimated that 40 students in his building work overnight shifts to earn an essential paycheck for their families. Many Schuyler students must accompany family members to appointments to translate, or miss multiple days to visit family in other countries.
Lack of affordable local child care can also keep students with younger siblings from making it to the classroom, said Nebraska City Public Schools Superintendent Mark Fritch.
Deb Rasmussen, president of the Lincoln Education Association and a longtime school counselor, described keeping food, clothes, toothpaste and a straightening iron in her room to meet student needs.
It's hard to go to class, and harder still to learn, when a student is worried about things like food, clothing and stable housing, said Nicole Seymour, director of Greater Omaha Attendance and Learning Services, which provides resources and counseling to chronically absent students.
"They're thinking about what's for dinner tonight, and am I going to be able to locate that for my kids?" Seymour said.
For students of all income levels, feelings of anxiety, depression and isolation have become more common since the outset of COVID-19, school officials said.
But students from low-income families are less likely to get help for these problems, and more likely to miss school as a result.
"The continued divide in those disparities of families that were already struggling, they just intensified," said Anne Hobbs, director of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Juvenile Justice Institute.
Absenteeism impacts students beyond their participation grades. Learning concepts often build upon each other. It's tough to relearn multiple days of concepts without consistent school attendance.
"We can't relive what a teacher does for the kid every day in the classroom," said Lisa Schroeder, principal at Meadows Elementary School in Ralston. "We had chickens in kindergarten. We cannot put that little chicken back in the egg and go through that process again. Your child misses out on critical events, relationships, happenings."
This lack of background knowledge impacts students' current and future school performance.
"We have 174 days to really do the work," Lefdal said. "Kids are missing 10, 15 days at a shot…They might have passed the class, but the issue is, they haven't met the standards."
Students also fall behind their peers socially when they regularly miss class, sometimes creating or worsening feelings of anxiety or isolation.
Chronic absenteeism can also affect the entire classroom. Teachers are forced to balance students who are grasping current material with those who are behind, sometimes sacrificing general instruction or planning time to individually reteach students. Rasmussen described similar struggles as a school counselor.
"That can take over my entire day," Rasmussen said. "[Counselors] would want to go out and do lessons on different things in the classroom. A lot of times, we spend all our time trying to track down kids and their families."

Now, some schools are working hard to reverse the effects of several years of skyrocketing absenteeism.

Schuyler Public Schools is one of the few school districts in the state to lower its rate of chronic student absenteeism in the last few years.

The school district has done so by creating a “recovery model” that requires students who are late or absent to make up that time after school or on weekends.

This program helps students stay on track academically, while also creating flexibility in student schedules, school leaders say. The district also dismisses students at 1:30 pm on Friday, providing time for students to make up absences at the tail-end of the week. The program has been utilized by pregnant students and students combating drug addiction, as well as those who work overnight shifts.

“Schools want to put all this policy and procedure in place that hurts kids, that doesn’t do the right things for them,” said Lefdal, the Schuyler high school principal. “But if we just spend a little time up front and actually do the work with the kid when they’re not in trouble, then you’re building relationships.”

Other Nebraska schools are focusing on rebuilding school communities while hoping to boost attendance.

Southern School District 1, located in Gage County, is introducing eSports this school year.

The goal: Reach students who don’t participate in athletics or the fine arts, and attempt to get them invested in coming to school, said Superintendent Chris Prososki.

Ogallala Public Schools has designed social media campaigns that target parents.

Ralston Public Schools created staff trading cards with teacher photos and fun facts for students to collect.

Ralston also added Principal Advisory Committees to each school, allowing a group of students to advise their building principal on chosen topics. Schroeder’s committee at Meadows Elementary focused on attendance.

Her students had a one-word answer when asked about an incentive to promptly attend class: Candy.

Ralston teachers now give Sour Patch Kids and lollipops to students in their seats when the first bell rings.

School districts across the state are also utilizing federal and state funds to combat some of the root causes of absenteeism.

Nebraska City Public Schools was one of three Nebraska districts that received a federal grant that allowed the district to contract community-based professional counseling for students.

Gage County received a grant that requires stakeholders across the county to meet quarterly and work to tackle the issues affecting school-age children.

“It is difficult sometimes in the rural area, because we don’t have as many resources that a Lincoln or Omaha (have),” said Christina Lyons, director of Gage County Multiple Agencies Partnering for Success Coalition. “What we don’t have in resources, we make up for in relationships. I feel like every person at that school is working with this kid or this family wants to see them succeed, wants to see them do their best.”

Back at Elliott Elementary in Lincoln, Mueller sits with her students in a circle, one of many strategies she calls “restorative practices” in her classroom.

Mueller was trained in restorative practices – a proactive mindset that intentionally builds community that emphasizes relationships – six years ago through her school district.

In her classroom, students are seated in a circle and hold a “talking object” when speaking. Mueller and her students work together in the first week of school to create a social contract, which outlines how students want to be treated by children and adults in the building. Since implementing these practices, instructional periods are less hectic and student misbehaviors less frequent, she said.
“Kids, they want to be good,” Mueller said. “They want to do the right thing. They want to be a part of a positive community. And so they’re gonna choose behavior that lets them be a part of that community.”
By Emma Schartz

OWH: Nebraska not moving to penalize companies for climate change policies

LINCOLN — Nebraska does not appear poised to join the small but growing number of states enacting policies penalizing investment firms focused on climate change and environmental issues. That is despite the fact Nebraska’s treasurer heads one of the leading organizations behind the movement.
Nebraska Treasurer John Murante chairs the State Financial Officers Foundation, which was the subject of a New York Times article in August. The story documented the connections between the nonprofit foundation and a campaign to “weaponize state treasurers’ offices” against efforts to reduce climate change. It includes the adoption of policies to restrict or otherwise punish companies that reduce their support for fossil fuel businesses.
Murante, who declined a request for a formal interview and provided comments via email, said such policies are not in the works in Nebraska at this time, but clarified his office has the authority to make sure “Nebraska’s best financial interests are met.”
According to the New York Times reporting, after President Joe Biden’s election, the foundation began its countereffort to slow his climate plan. Since then, at least five primarily conservative states have passed laws to restrict businesses that have cut ties with fossil fuel companies.
For example, West Virginia earlier this year adopted a law that allows that state’s treasurer to blacklist banks from receiving state contracts if the banks have limited their relationship with fossil fuel companies. West Virginia’s treasurer said in a press release that the law would help “protect our coal, oil and natural gas workers and companies from unfair, un-American boycotts.”
Similar policies have not been proposed in Nebraska, and outgoing State Sen. Matt Williams of Gothenburg, who chairs the Legislature’s Banking, Commerce and Insurance Committee, said he hasn’t caught wind of any potential bills that may come up in future legislative sessions. Moreover, he said he doesn’t think it would be wise to put “fences” around Nebraska’s borders simply because a company supports climate action.
In addition to being largely run by Republicans, the states that have adopted those policies also tend to be rich in fossil fuel resources — coal in Kentucky and West Virginia, oil and gas in Texas and Oklahoma.
By comparison, Nebraska has a low stake in the fossil fuel industry. It doesn’t produce any coal, and contributes only 0.03% of the nation’s total crude oil reserves, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

While Nebraska's fossil fuel presence is small and slowing, the state's renewable energy industry is small but growing. The Energy Information Administration reported that Nebraska is the country's second-largest producer of fuel ethanol, and has some of the best wind energy potential in the U.S.
The State Financial Officers Foundation and its members have been accused of pushing the restrictions out of political motivations, rather than doing so for the financial benefit of their states.
Dawn Rockey, a Democrat who served a term as Nebraska treasurer in the 1990s, said although the treasurer is an elected position, it hasn't traditionally been seen as a partisan role.
The treasurer serves as the chief financial officer for the state government. The office offers college savings plans, seeks to return unclaimed property to citizens and handles child support payments.
Rockey said she doesn't see how the climate change policies could be interpreted as anything other than a political move.
"It's outside the scope of the job," Rockey said.
State Financial Officers Foundation members, including Murante, a Republican, have rebuked these accusations, arguing that they are not the ones playing politics — it's the climate activists pushing a political agenda.
"We simply want financial institutions to make the best decisions based on their fiduciary responsibility, not based on politics," Murante said in the email.
One company at the center of this issue is the multitrillion-dollar investment firm BlackRock, whose CEO Larry Fink has openly stated his desire to move away from fossil fuels in favor of more sustainable energy sources.
BlackRock has landed on lists of blacklisted firms in West Virginia and Texas.
Murante said his office does not have a "banking relationship" with BlackRock. However, several other state offices are focusing on the company.
The Nebraska State Investment Council, which Murante is a nonvoting member of, heard a presentation from BlackRock representatives in July about a policy known as "Environmental, Social and Governance," or ESG, which is criteria used by companies to make environmentally smart investments.
And in August, Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson joined 18 other attorneys general in signing onto a letter questioning BlackRock's practices "of putting investors' interests and returns behind the asset manager's ideological push."
Peterson told The World-Herald that he became concerned about BlackRock after hearing about the company's views in the news. His office has not received any complaints about the company.
Climate change policy should be debated by state legislatures, rather than dictated by businesses, Peterson said. He described the practices by BlackRock as "corporate tyranny." Although there are other companies that concern Peterson for similar reasons, he said BlackRock is "the biggest dog in the backyard."
Peterson said he hopes by shining a spotlight on BlackRock, smaller companies take it as a cue to reduce their support for climate action.
Meanwhile, Michael Walden-Newman with the Nebraska Investment Council said BlackRock's presentation was mainly to educate the council about ESG. He said he approached BlackRock requesting the presentation after Fink released a letter supporting ESG earlier this year. BlackRock oversees some of the council's investments.
Walden-Newman declined to say whether the council, which manages $40 billion in investments, was considering any actions for or against BlackRock.
Murante asserted that companies supporting ESG have a "devastating" impact on Nebraskans and

the state's economy. Similar to Peterson, Murante said climate change policies need to be considered "in Washington, not Wall Street."
"There are attacks by extremist global elites on American farmers, ranchers, and energy production going on right now," Murante said in the email.
However, many environmental experts argue that climate change mitigation is financially wise, mainly because efforts will only become more expensive as time goes on.
Climate change could be especially costly in states like Nebraska, where the agriculture sector is known as the backbone of the state's economy. A recent report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City noted that Nebraska's gross domestic product grew at the fastest pace in 10 years during 2021, largely "driven by expansion in many industries and notable strength in agriculture."
A 2014 report by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln noted that climate change-induced stresses will lead to declines in crop and livestock production in many agricultural regions.
By Erin Bamer

Nebraska Examiner: Prairie preservationists mourn loss of virgin prairie at Google data center site

"Anybody can love the mountains, but it takes a soul to love the prairie." — Willa Cather
OMAHA — A prairie in bloom has a special attraction for biologists like Tom Bragg and Glenn Pollock. Both can tell stories of being chased off a small, private plot of virgin prairie they had individually spied while driving along State Street in northwest Omaha.
"The guy who owned it was very grumpy, and he'd run people off," said Pollock, a retired Omaha medical technician who has helped manage prairie plots in the metro area for 30 years.
But these days, these two prairie proponents are in mourning.
That 5-acre prairie plot along State Street, which had been harvested for its hay for decades, was bulldozed away about a year ago as part of Google's plan to build a $750 million data center just west of Nebraska Highway 133.
Bragg, a University of Nebraska at Omaha professor who specializes in prairie ecosystems and manages UNO's 525-acre Glacier Creek Preserve, said there's a special kind of sadness when one of Nebraska's few remaining, never-plowed prairies is lost.
Tallgrass prairie covered 170 million acres
Tallgrass prairies once covered 170 million acres of the Great Plains, including most of eastern Nebraska. But farming and development have taken out an estimated 98% to 99% of it, leaving only small remnants in what was an ocean of grass.
In the Omaha area, only about eight virgin prairie plots remain, compared to about 22 in 1980, said Bragg and Pollock.
Prairies, Pollock said, are "just flat-out beautiful."
"It's part of our natural history, our heritage," he said. "We're just throwing away the pieces."
"It's gone," Bragg said of the State Street prairie. "It was not in the best spot (near development sites). It was not too surprising that someone did it in."
But what most disappoints Bragg and Pollock is that the City of Omaha has guidelines to protect virgin prairie and, in this case, those guidelines weren't followed.

Master plan calls for protection

The City of Omaha's Master Plan calls for "effective measures" to protect "natural features" from destruction, features such as ravines, wetlands, Missouri River bluffs and prairies.

The plan, more of a guideline than an edict, calls for mitigation if a woodland, wetland or virgin prairie is to be removed by development. In the case of virgin prairie, two acres of such prairie should be replaced for every acre removed.

But Eric Englund, Omaha's assistant city planner, said the existence of a native prairie never came up during discussions in which he was present over the Google project, which was a well-kept secret until it was announced in April by Mayor Stothert and other officials.

The prairie, Englund said, was identified on a map kept by the City Parks Department. But for some reason, it did not come up, he said, during the approval process of the Google project.

'Don't know if it was missed'

"I don't know if it was missed, or if it was agreed that mitigation of the prairie was not necessary," he said.

While mitigation for removal of wetlands and trees is regularly done as part of development agreements, Englund said this is the first time in his 16 years with the city that a virgin prairie was involved.

He said he has had some brief conversations with representatives of Google about the loss of the prairie plot, but at this point, after the city has already approved the development plan, there is no intention of requiring the company to replace it.

"If they want to recreate some prairie, that's up to them," Englund said.

"The city dropped the ball," Pollock said.

Both Pollack and Bragg don't exactly blame Google for the destruction, since they may not have been aware they they were scraping away virgin prairie.

But they are frustrated that saving the prairie wasn't considered, and wonder why the giant tech company, which touts itself as using carbon-free energy and seeking a sustainable future, didn't do its own inventory of the land it purchased — before the bulldozers moved in.

"They should have had a biologist go to look at a site to see what they bought," Pollock said.

Google working with 'local partners'

When emailed several questions and asked to comment, Google spokesman Devon Smiley responded with one sentence: "We have been working closely with our local partners in Omaha to determine a suitable plan."

Both Bragg and Pollock have been involved in saving prairie plots elsewhere in the metro area.

Bragg worked with the city to preserve one virgin prairie, the Bauermeister Prairie at Zorinsky Lake. He also worked on the Bluestem Prairie Preserve near 168th and Blondo Streets, which has portions of that were virgin prairie.

Bragg has also worked to transform farmland back into prairie at UNO's Glacier Creek Preserve, at 144th and State Streets, which features a restored barn that hosts concerts, art shows and meetings.

Pollock helps manage several prairie areas, including the Audubon Prairie, near 72nd Street and McKinley Road, of which is half virgin prairie. He also helps manage virgin prairie at the Cuming City Cemetery near Blair and at Vincent Bluff State Preserve in Council Bluffs.

Can learn from prairie

We can learn a lot about surviving drought and dry weather from prairie plants, he said. The deep-rooted prairie plants are the main reason Nebraska has such rich soils, he added.

Pollock said he's not interested in requiring Google to mitigate the loss of the prairie, although

something similar occurred voluntarily in the past.
When Google first built a data center in Council Bluffs 15 years ago, workers removed dirt from the sensitive Loess Hills bluffs nearby, he said, which raised concerns from conservationists.
Not much happened until a $20,000 check arrived in the mailbox of one of those who protested, Pollock said, written out to the Loess Hills Preservation Society.
The money, he said, was a big help in restoring and cleaning up the site of the Vincent Bluff Preserve.
By Paul Hammel

OWH: Top Republican on House Veterans Affairs Committee tours Omaha VA hospital

The top Republican on the House Veterans Affairs Committee got a look at the Omaha VA hospital and its 2-year-old ambulatory care clinic this week.
He liked what he saw.
"You've got a great facility," said Rep. Mike Bost, R-Illinois. "There are certain VA facilities that are aging out, certain ones the veterans don't want to go to. You don't get that here."
Bost, a Marine Corps veteran who has served in the U.S. House of Representatives since 2015, joined Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., for a tour that also included the Victory Apartments for formerly homeless veterans and Omaha National Cemetery.
Bost is in line to chair the committee if Republicans manage to retake the House in the November elections.
He also has visited VA hospitals and clinics in Illinois and Iowa this past week as part of his committee oversight duties.
"It also allows us to carry best practices from one to the other," Bost said. "Each one is uniquely different."
Bacon wanted Bost to see the clinic, which was built through a public-private partnership authorized by legislation championed by Bacon and authored by his Democratic predecessor, Brad Ashford.
A decade ago, Congress approved $56 million as a down payment on a new VA hospital to replace the outdated Omaha facility, which opened in 1950.
But the VA construction program broke down after massive cost overruns plagued a hospital construction project in Colorado. The Omaha project languished on the VA's wish list.
In 2016, Nebraska's congressional delegation successfully pushed through the CHIP-IN for Veterans Act, which allowed private contributions to VA construction projects. The philanthropic group Heritage Omaha (previously known as Heritage Services) raised $30 million locally and managed the project, which opened in August 2020.
The act was reauthorized last year. The VA has made use of the legislation for another project in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Bacon said it is also being used to contribute as much as $1 billion in local money to the planned $2.6 billion Project NExT.
The UNMC/Nebraska Medicine project would combine a state-of-the-art teaching hospital with a federally funded research facility to boost the nation's response to pandemics, natural disasters and environmental catastrophes.
UNMC has also floated the possibility of including a new inpatient hospital for the VA in Project

NExT.
Bost said he hopes to see more projects follow the Omaha model.
“It’s an amazing veterans hospital,” he said. “What’s most amazing is what they’ve done with the public-private partnership.”
Besides visiting the VA sites, Bost and Bacon attended a ceremony Wednesday to mark the signing of a U.S. Army “Partnership for Your Success” (PaYS) agreement with Truck Center Companies, a truck dealership in Sarpy County.
The PaYS program guarantees Army and Army National Guard soldiers five job interviews at participating companies after they leave the military.
By Steve Liewer

AP: US election conspiracies find fertile ground in conferences

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — On a quiet Saturday in an Omaha hotel, about 50 people gathered in a ballroom to learn about elections.
The subject wasn’t voter registration drives or poll worker volunteer training. Instead, they paid $25 each to listen to panelists lay out conspiracy theories about voting machines and rigged election results. In language that sometimes leaned into violent imagery, some panelists called on those attending to join what they framed as a battle between good and evil.
Among those in the audience was Melissa Sauder, who drove nearly 350 miles from the small western Nebraska town of Grant with her 13-year-old daughter. After years of combing internet sites, listening to podcasts and reading conservative media reports, Sauder wanted to learn more about what she believes are serious problems with the integrity of U.S. elections.
She can’t shake the belief that voting machines are being manipulated even in her home county, where then-President Donald Trump won 85% of the vote in 2020.
“I just don’t know the truth because it’s not open and apparent, and it’s not transparent to us,” said Sauder, 38. “We are trusting people who are trusting the wrong people.”
It’s a sentiment now shared by millions of people in the United States after relentless attacks on the outcome of the 2020 presidential election by Trump and his allies. Nearly two years after that election, no evidence has emerged to suggest widespread fraud or manipulation while reviews in state after state have upheld the results showing President Joe Biden won.
Even so, the attacks and falsehoods have made an impact: An Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll from 2021 found that about two-thirds of Republicans say they do not think Biden was legitimately elected.
Events like the one held Aug. 27 in Nebraska’s largest city are one reason why.
Billed as the “Nebraska Election Integrity Forum,” the conference featured some of the nation’s most prominent figures pushing conspiracy theories that the last presidential election was stolen from Trump through widespread fraud or manipulation of voting machines. It was just one of dozens of similar events that have been held around the country for the better part of a year.
Despite the relatively light attendance, the events are often livestreamed and recorded, ensuring they can reach a wide audience.

Over eight hours with only a brief lunch break, attendees were deluged with election conspiracies, complete with charts and slide shows. Speakers talked about tampering of voting machines or the systems that store voter rolls, ballot-box stuffing and massive numbers of votes cast by dead people and non-U.S. citizens -- all theories that have been debunked.

There is no evidence of widespread fraud or tampering with election equipment that could have affected the outcome of the 2020 election, in which Biden won both the popular vote — topping the Republican incumbent by more than 7 million nationwide — and the Electoral College count.

Numerous official reviews and audits in the six battleground states where Trump challenged his loss have upheld the validity of the results. Judges, including some appointed by Trump, dismissed numerous lawsuits making various claims of fraud and wrongdoing.

Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, and other advisers and top government officials told him there was no evidence of widespread fraud. As part of the U.S. House committee's investigation of the riot at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, Barr told congressional investigators that the claims by Trump allies surrounding voting machines were disturbing but also were "made in such a sensational way that they obviously were influencing a lot of people." He added that the false claims were doing a "grave disservice to the country."

Many local and state election officials have said the conspiracies have already led to rampant misinformation, vitriol aimed at election workers and calls to toss out voting equipment. Trey Grayson, a former Republican secretary of state in Kentucky who is critical of those spreading conspiracy theories, said previous election-year attacks were focused on candidates or political parties but now are targeted at election administration.

"There are a lot of really bad actors here that are trying to undermine confidence in a system. It is dangerous," he said.

Despite all the evidence that the 2020 election was fair and the results accurate, the conspiracy theories have persuaded many Republicans otherwise — with real world consequences.

In New Mexico this year, fears of voting machines being manipulated led one rural county commission to threaten that it would vote against certifying the results of its primary election even though the county clerk insisted the results were accurate. In Nevada, a rural county is pushing ahead with a plan to count by hand its thousands of ballots this November, a lengthy and painstaking process that ironically could lead to errors.

At the Omaha conference, evidence of an accurate election was ignored as speaker after speaker told attendees that machines are rigged and elections are stolen. One of the event's headliners was Patrick Byrne, the former CEO of Overstock.com who said he has spent some $20 million of his own money since 2020 trying to prove that voting machines were manipulated in that election and remain susceptible to tampering.

Wearing jeans and a black suit jacket over a yellow T-shirt, Byrne began his presentation by saying voting machines are vulnerable to hacking and outlining various security failures associated with them.

That any technology is vulnerable, including voting machines, is not in dispute. State and local election officials throughout the U.S. have focused on improving their security defenses with help from the federal government. After the 2016 election, the government designated voting systems as "critical infrastructure" -- on par with the nation's banks, dams and nuclear power plants.

Government and election security experts have declared the 2020 election as "the most secure in American history."

But Byrne and some of the other speakers said they believe government has been corrupted and

cannot be trusted. In his remarks, he complained about those who say fraud did not occur in 2020 and about journalists who report that, labeling them "election fraud deniers."
He accused critics of "trying to incite violence" and later told the attendees that China is planning to take over the U.S. by 2030.
"I can promise, every nice home in the United States, there's someone in China who already has a deed to your home," Byrne said, eliciting gasps from the crowd.
Another main speaker at the Omaha event was Douglas Frank, an Ohio math and science educator who has been traveling the country engaging with community groups and meeting with local election officials, offering to examine and analyze their voting systems.
Commonly known as Dr. Frank because of his doctorate in chemistry, he gives off a professorial vibe with his signature bow tie and glasses. He peppers his presentations with algorithms, line graphs and charts that he claims prove elections are corrupt. Frank said he has been to 43 states over the past 20 months.
He had harsh words for some of those who oversee elections at the state level.
"I like to tell people that we have evil secretaries of states," Frank said. "We have a few of those in our country, and it's sort of like World War II — when the war's over, we need to have Nuremberg trials and we need to have firing squads, OK? I'm looking forward to the trials, OK?"
The crowd applauded.
State and local election officials have faced a barrage of harassment and death threats since the 2020 election. That has led some to quit or retire, raising concerns about a loss of experience heading into the November general election, along with worries that their replacements may seek to meddle in elections or tamper with voting systems.
Also addressing the audience was Tina Peters, the clerk of Mesa County, Colorado, who has been charged in a security breach of voting systems in her election office. She has claimed she had an obligation to investigate and produced reports purporting to show tampering with voting systems, but her claims have been debunked by local authorities and experts.
During her remarks over video conference, Peters impugned the integrity of judges who have rejected dozens of legal efforts to challenge the 2020 presidential results. She urged citizens to join in the fight.
"You can't be afraid of going to jail," Peters told the crowd. "They can't get us all. Be bold. Be courageous. The Lord is on our side."
Frank, in an online post after the event, apologized for remarks he made during the forum about Nebraska's chief election official, Secretary of State Bob Evnen. Frank had called Evnen, a Republican, incompetent and said the official had "made a fool of himself" by refuting Frank's assertions that called into question the security of Nebraska's election.
One of the organizers of the event was Robert Borer, who unsuccessfully challenged Evnen in Nebraska's GOP primary this year. Borer said he ran because he was convinced that state election officials were not doing enough to address fraud and he believes the 2020 election was stolen.
"The whole objective of that election was to take down Trump," he said.
Since losing his bid to become the state's top election official, Borer has launched a campaign for Nebraska governor as a write-in candidate. This means his name will not appear on the November ballot, which, for him and his supporters, is entirely the point.
"We don't want the machines to count our votes," Borer said. "If someone casts a write-in vote, the machine has to kick that out. It cannot read that vote, so they have to count that manually."
The Omaha conference was sponsored by American Citizens & Candidates Forum for Election

Integrity, which has hosted more than a dozen such gatherings since the 2020 election.
The event was a study in contradictions.
Speakers insisted the issue of election integrity transcended party politics, with many repeating "this is not about Republicans or Democrats," before maligning both Democrats and so-called RINOs -- an acronym for "Republicans in name only" -- as "evil" or "criminal."
Speakers insisted that they rejected violence, yet they were throwing out menacing terms.
"I believe we're in a civil war," Graham Ledger, a conservative television show host, told the crowd at one point. "It's an unconventional, asymmetrical civil war, but it's red state versus blue state now."
Mark Finchem, the Republican nominee for secretary of state in Arizona, appeared remotely and spoke about his efforts to compel his state to ditch voting machines and switch to hand-counting ballots. Election experts say that process is time-consuming, will delay results and is unnecessary due to the rigorous testing that occurs before and after an election to ensure the equipment is working correctly.
"We have a fight on our hands," Finchem told attendees. "The establishment and the Democrats want to do everything they can to subvert our elections."
The speakers urged those in attendance to take action. That includes getting to know their local election officials and local sheriff, and to volunteer to be poll watchers for the November election with the goal of reporting any activity they think could be fraudulent.
Omaha resident Kathy Austin said she recently submitted her name to serve as a poll worker, but has not heard back from local election officials. She is convinced that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump.
"I had not really been involved in politics before the 2020 election," said Austin, 75. That began to change after she saw posts making claims of election fraud on the social media platform Telegram, which is popular with Trump supporters.
"Then I talked to different people," she said. "And the more I learned, the more it became clear there is a problem."
By Margery A. Beck and Christina A. Cassidy

OWH: Court hearing in Herbster v. Slama lawsuit postponed for second time

LINCOLN — The next chapter in the saga of dueling lawsuits between former gubernatorial candidate Charles W. Herbster and State Sen. Julie Slama has been postponed for a second time.
The next hearing in the case, which had been scheduled for Tuesday, is now scheduled for Oct. 3 after Slama's team filed for the postponement Friday morning. The hearing was originally scheduled for Aug. 15, before it was pushed for the first time.
Judge Rick Schreiner said the hearing will consider arguments on a motion by Slama's legal team, which would require Herbster's team to hand over information relevant to the case.
Herbster filed a defamation lawsuit against the Dunbar senator in April after the Nebraska Examiner reported allegations from eight women who said Herbster — a Republican mega-donor and then-candidate for governor — had groped them in recent years. Slama was the only named accuser in

that initial report.
She answered Herbster's lawsuit quickly and filed a counterclaim alleging sexual battery.
The first hearing in the case was held in June, where Schreiner considered five motions, but only made decisions on two of them.
Slama had given notice to depose Herbster on May 6, but Herbster opted not to attend. At the first hearing, Herbster's lawyers filed a motion to quash the deposition notice and seek a protective order that would limit his deposition to "scheduling at a mutually convenient time."
Schreiner overruled the motion from Herbster's legal team, but a new deposition was not scheduled at the hearing. Since then, Schreiner ruled that Herbster could add more evidence to his defamation complaint against Slama, and that the deposition could wait until the amended complaints were filed.
Herbster's team filed their amended complaint on July 28, but Slama's lawyers requested an extension to answer the complaint, pushing the deadline to Sept. 26.
Since the first hearing, Schreiner also quashed Herbster's request for a protective order against Slama's attorneys for, in the words of Herbster's attorney, attempting to try the case in the press.
Both Herbster and Slama's lawyers did not respond to multiple requests for comment via email.
By Erin Bamer

Nebraska Examiner: Former Republican Wright could join Nebraska governor's race as nonpartisan

OMAHA — Nebraska voters looking beyond the two major political parties and a Libertarian could have a fourth choice on November's general election ballot for governor.
Long-odds candidate David Wright of Ewing is trying to get on — as a nonpartisan candidate.
Wright, a former Republican who has re-registered as a nonpartisan, should hear next week if he turned in enough valid signatures to petition onto the fall ballot.
Wright spoke at a Kearney event organized in July by the Nebraska Freedom Coalition to help topple the former leaders of the Nebraska Republican Party. He is a long-time conservative who advocates replacing income and property taxes with a sales tax on goods and services called a consumption tax.
His campaign declined to comment Friday about the signatures. Wright is a former rancher who helped found the Independent Cattlemen of Nebraska. He owned weekly newspapers in Neligh, Ewing and Clearwater, which his campaign website said he sold in 2019.
A partisan nonpartisan
An interesting quirk: His pick for lieutenant governor on a potential nonpartisan ticket is still registered as a Republican. Tom Dierks, a social worker and a former legislative candidate in Lincoln, is the son of former State Sen. Cap Dierks.
The Secretary of State's Office said it could find no state law that prevents Dierks from running as a nonpartisan candidate for lieutenant governor while being a Republican.
Nebraska election law prevents gubernatorial candidates from running as nonpartisans if they belong to a party. It does not ponder the running mates of nonpartisans petitioning onto the ballot.
Potential impact on GOP
If Wright makes the fall ballot, he could pull some conservative voters away from the GOP nominee

for governor, University of Nebraska Regent Jim Pillen of Columbus.
Another wrinkle could be the write-in candidacy of former GOP Secretary of State candidate Robert Borer, an election denier who has said Pillen is not his GOP nominee.
Borer has until Oct. 28 to file the affidavit to have his write-in votes counted, officials said. He will also have to pay a $1,050 filing fee. He had not filed as of Friday afternoon.
Borer, in a message to supporters Saturday, described his effort as a “war” on “the self-appointed ruling class.” He said “patriots” should vote against Pillen and Blood.
Wright, Borer and Libertarian candidate Scott Zimmerman of Omaha could shave off some of the 258,000-voter registration advantage that the GOP and its candidates enjoy over Democrats in Nebraska.
But Pillen remains the race’s favorite over Democratic State Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue, political observers said.

GOP, Dems react

New Nebraska Republican Party chairman Eric Underwood said in a previous interview that he respects the right of Republicans and former Republicans to speak out and run.
But, he said, the party and his fellow Republicans support Pillen as their nominee.
State GOP spokeswoman Meg Kallina preached unity behind Pillen and other conservative Republican candidates “rooted in the Constitution.” She called him the “governor-elect.”
“Republicans are the party of conservative values,” Kallina said in a statement Friday. “One message, one goal…one team.”
Nebraska Democratic Party Chair Jane Kleeb said she sees something else, a Republican Party that is “torn at the seam.”
“They do not have a unified party,” Kleeb said. “There are at least three competing factions that will divide up their voters, giving Democrats a clear path, not only for Congress and governor, but for the Legislature as well.”

What’s next

Under state law, Wright must gather 4,000 signatures statewide, including 750 from each of Nebraska’s three congressional districts. Verification takes days.
Election officials at the state and county levels will have to hurry because the November ballot must be finalized by Sept. 16 to print ballots for early voting.
By Aaron Sanderford

OWH Editorial: Student journalists' press freedoms attacked by school officials

Editor’s Note: Lee Enterprises’ Nebraska daily newspapers — the Omaha World-Herald, Lincoln Journal Star, Grand Island Independent, Kearney Hub, Beatrice Daily Sun, Columbus Telegram, Fremont Tribune, North Platte Telegraph, Scottsbluff Star-Herald and York News-Times — are taking the unusual step of uniting our editorial voices today to address a vital freedom of the press issue in Grand Island.
In the latest snub to student journalists’ First Amendment rights, Northwest School District officials in Grand Island have not only eliminated the high school newspaper, but also cut the journalism

program in its entirety.
This is an unreasonable — and unconstitutional — attack on press freedom and we, the editors of Lee Enterprises' Nebraska daily newspapers, strongly encourage district officials to reconsider their decision.
It's true that student journalism rights in Nebraska are not unlimited. In Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier (1988), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school officials can censor school-sponsored publications if their decision is "reasonably related to a legitimate pedagogical purpose." This means school officials must show that they have a reasonable educational reason for censoring the material.
We would love to know what educational reason the superintendent and administrators have for censoring their student journalists, ending the Northwest High School's newspaper, the Viking Saga, and shutting down the journalism program. Keep in mind, this is happening at a public school.
The limited explanations given from them appear to be far from reasonable. In fact, it looks more like narrow-minded, blatant censorship and total disregard for the First Amendment — based in anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment.
Printed in May at the end of the 2021-22 school year, the final edition of the Viking Saga included two student editorials on LGBTQ topics, and a news article titled, "Pride and prejudice: LGBTQIA+" on the origins of Pride Month (June) and the history of homophobia. Other articles in the paper explained registering for classes, highlighted achievements by the Future Business Leaders of America chapter and told the story of a group of siblings' adoption.
As first reported by the Grand Island Independent's Jessica Votipka, Northwest Superintendent Jeff Edwards said the decision to cut the paper and program was nothing more than "administrative."
Northwest Public School Board Vice President Zach Mader gave a little more insight to the Independent, saying that in the past, "I do think there have been talks of doing away with our newspaper if we were not going to be able to control content that we saw (as) inappropriate."
What exactly was deemed inappropriate? Was the information in the class registration story totally inaccurate or libelous? Was there a public outcry from members of other clubs infuriated by coverage of the FBLA's awards? Was the piece about adoption that polemical?
Nope.
Earlier this year, the Saga staff were reprimanded by district officials after publishing the preferred pronouns and names of transgender and non-binary students in bylines and articles. The students were told to only use birth names going forward. For some people who identify as transgender or non-binary, being forced to use their birth or "dead" name can be a traumatic experience.
Then came the June issue.
"The very last (Saga) issue that came out this year, there was … a little bit of hostility amongst some," Mader said. "There were editorials that were essentially, I guess what I would say, LGBTQ."
There it is.
If this is truly the case, then the district cannot invoke Hazelwood as a defense for its actions. Bigotry is not a reasonable educational reason for censorship.
Truth is not always comfortable. Student journalists have the right to report on the truths that affect them and their school communities, even if district officials don't like the subject matter. Taking offense to something is a personal choice. Prejudice should have no part here.
Don't wrap up censorship in pretty paper and try to call it "administrative."
In the wake of Hazelwood, some states — including our neighbor to the east, Iowa — wisely passed laws protecting student journalists and their advisors. In 2021, Nebraska Sen. Adam Morfeld

introduced and admirably fought for LB 88, a bill that would have prohibited school districts from censoring student publications. Sadly, it was killed when it fell three votes short of the threshold needed to shut off debate after six hours. No meaningful action has been taken on the legislation since its failure in 2021.

We hope in the next legislative session there will be a senator, or group of senators, brave enough to reintroduce similar legislation to protect Nebraska's student journalists and prevent further acts of censorship.

Fifty-two years ago, the famed (and androgynous) singer-songwriter David Bowie sang "… And these children that you spit on as they try to change their worlds are immune to your consultations. They're quite aware of what they're going through …"

Those words — like those written in the First Amendment that constitutionally protect the freedom of press — still hold true. We, the editors of Lee Enterprises' Nebraska newspapers — as well as countless other journalists around the state and country — stand with the student journalists of the Northwest High School Viking Saga and condemn the actions of the district's administrators and superintendent.

OWH Midlands Voices: When it comes to the climate, if we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem

Well, it's official: OPPD will be burning coal at the North Omaha plant for three years longer than they promised. They got themselves into a real fix. Those who live in North Omaha will bear the brunt of the polluted air for three more years.

Omaha is already ranked in the top 10 cities in the U.S. for asthma rates and North Omaha has the highest rates within Omaha. So, what should be done? The resolution that the OPPD Board passed in August acknowledged the need to not only engage the North Omaha community, but to also diminish the impact on North Omaha of burning coal for three more years.

One thing that can help is for Omaha to finally get moving on a Climate Action Plan like 35 out of the top 50 most populated cities already have. City Council President Pete Festersen will be putting forth a resolution at the September 13 City Council meeting to fund a consultant to get the Climate Action Plan started after it has languished for months. Lincoln already has a Climate Action Plan.

OPPD is in the process of hiring a vice president for sustainability and environmental affairs. It is essential that OPPD, leaders in the Omaha-metro area and organizations such as the Sierra Club that have been working on climate solutions for decades, cooperate on the Climate Action Plan.

There is much talk and considerable funding for economic development in Omaha's downtown core as well as in North and South Omaha. It is vital that new buildings are energy efficient and have solar energy where feasible. There should be programs to help people to make their homes more energy efficient. Otherwise, Omaha will be locked into a future of greater and greater energy needs.

Energy efficiency and solar energy will help stabilize the grid and will save on electric bills for the owners and occupants of the new buildings. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which got no support from Nebraska's Congressional delegation, should be able to assist in this clean transition.

Schools, churches, public buildings and parking lots (like the parking lots at Disneyland Paris) should produce their own solar energy. For example, science and technology magnet schools (like King

Science Center) could add solar to their roof and parking lot. Using the model that some schools in Florida have adopted, these schools could serve as learning centers about renewable energy, and with battery backup they can serve as emergency shelters during outages or cooling centers on hot days like we've had so many of this summer. When not acting as a shelter or cooling center the schools are saving thousands of dollars on their electric bills.

We could duplicate the solar project that KCI Airport's is developing or Offutt AFB could look to Edwards AFB's public/private solar development.

The transportation sector can embrace electric vehicles. The Omaha metro area can be creative in using IRA funds to electrify public vehicles and corporate fleets. This has already started in other cities in the U.S; and around the world.

If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem. Our $3.5 billion 2019 flood (including the compromising of Offutt AFB and the National Guard Facility) and our current drought, should be a wake-up call that we need to address the climate crisis. It's going to take a team effort.

David E. Corbin, Ph.D. is the energy committee chair of the Nebraska Sierra Club, and an advisory board member of the American Public Health Association's Center for Climate, Health & Equity.

OWH Midlands Voices: Response to Omaha Archdiocese's policy on human sexuality for Catholic schools

The Archdiocese of Omaha recently approved a "Policy on Human Sexuality" for "Students, Parents, and Guardians" and "Employees and Volunteers" to be added to Catholic schools' handbooks. Based on widespread negative responses to the policy, Archbishop Lucas announced that he is delaying its implementation (Aug. 31, 2022) and invites additional feedback. We offer constructive feedback on the policy in our response.

The policy, which has three specific directives, sparked outrage among many faculty, administrators, students, and parents. First, the school "shall not sponsor, endorse, facilitate, host, or provide any accommodation to any person, group, entity, event, or activity that would condone or promote a view of sexual identity that is contrary to the church's teachings, including views of gender and sexuality contrary to Catholic teachings."

Second, schools "shall, at all times, act toward a person in accordance with his or her biological sex at birth. In all cases, the school must act in accord with Christian charity."

Third, "at all times, students, children, and youth participating in … activities shall conduct themselves in accord with their biological sex at birth."

We have several comments to make regarding this policy. First, the language of the policy is ambiguous. It allows for students to have a "romantic date … only with a person of the opposite biological sex." What constitutes "a romantic date?" What are the criteria for making this distinction between same-sex friends and heterosexual friends? It notes that if an "expression of gender, sexual identity or sexuality should cause confusion, disrupt the educational integrity of the Catholic education program, or cause scandal, the matter will be discussed with the student and his/her parent." If unable to be resolved, the student will be dismissed from the school. All of these criteria are ambiguous and open to interpretation.

In addition, "students will conduct themselves in accord with their biological sex at all times …."

What does this mean? Catholic teaching affirms that sex and gender are distinct though inseparable and promotes scientific studies that attempt to discern how sexual difference is lived out in various cultures. Such studies should inform our understanding of the interrelationship between sex and gender. Church teaching acknowledges a plurality of cultural influences and understandings of how gender is expressed, which is not even acknowledge in the policy. Who is qualified to judge what constitutes an acceptable and unacceptable cultural expression of one's biological sex and to interpret and apply policy guidelines?

Second, the policy fails to distinguish between different, and even conflicting, Catholic teachings, which all students, parents, faculty, etc., must conform to, and gives unjustified emphasis to Catholic sexual teaching (CSeT) over Catholic social teaching (CSoT). Catholic teaching recognizes that people do not choose their sexual orientation, it is part of their very identity, and calls for people with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" to be "accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity," but it immediately goes on to state that "every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided."

The condemnation of "unjust discrimination" opens the door for the promotion of so-called "just discrimination" against them. Yet CSoT is clear that discrimination is immoral. It teaches that "The equality of men [and women] rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: 'Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design.'"

Pope Francis' distinction between same-sex marriage and same-sex civil unions sheds light on the policy's prioritization of CSeT over CSoT. His recognition of legal protections for same-sex civil unions makes an important distinction between civil law and church teaching, prioritizes Catholic social teaching over sexual teaching, recognizes that LGBTQ+ people are discriminated against and need legal protection, and calls the church to practice respect, compassion, and hospitality towards them. If respect, compassion, and hospitality should extend to the civil and legal realms, it should certainly extend to our Catholic institutions, including Catholic schools. The Archdiocesan policy fails miserably on this account.

Third, one of the leading causes of young people leaving the church and teen suicides or attempted suicides are discrimination and bullying related to one's sexual identity, which is being formed throughout adolescence. An international survey in 2016 demonstrated that those raised Catholic were more likely than those raised in any other religion to cite negative treatment of LGBT+ persons as their primary reason for leaving the church, 39% vs. 29% respectively.

A 2020 report on LGBT mental health reports that 48% of those surveyed reported engaging in self harm in the past twelve months and 40% had seriously considered suicide in the past twelve months. Jesuit James Martin accurately states that "Stigmatizing language, especially stigmatizing language from religion [as found in the policy]…can have life-and-death consequences."

Fourth, the policy violates the authority and inviolability of conscience. Pope Francis states the church is called "to form consciences, not to replace them." A well-formed conscience can, and should, have the freedom to voice disagreement with the church's non-infallible teaching on sexual ethical issues without fear of any punitive response.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the policy designates all employees and volunteers, whether they are involved in religious education or not, as ministerial. The "ministerial exception" is a specific legal designation that allows the archdiocese to fire or dismiss anyone, regardless of their role in a specific ministerial capacity, if that person is judged to have violated the policy. In other words, it protects

the archdiocese from discrimination lawsuits and promotes so-called “just discrimination.”
Human dignity, not legal protection against lawsuits, should be the motivation behind any Catholic policy. Unfortunately, the current policy violates human dignity and will further alienate many young people and those who educate them from the church.
By Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler

OWH Midlands Voices: This Labor Day, remember that we all do better when we all do better

As the nation honors the incalculable contributions that organized labor has made to improve the lives of all Americans on Labor Day, there are encouraging signs that the labor movement has momentum on its side for the first time in decades. But can it be sustained to grow the labor movement, which has been in decline since its heyday in the 1950s?
Fully 68% of Americans approve of labor unions, according to a Gallup poll conducted in September 2021, the highest measured by Gallup since 1965. This positive sentiment is particularly evident among the surveyed 18- to 34-year-olds who delivered unions a whopping 77% approval rating.
One reason for the resurgence in labor’s popularity is the ever-widening wage gap between CEOs and the average worker.
Data from the U.S. Commerce Department shows that corporate profit margins are the largest they have been in 70 years. A recent study of 300 top U.S. companies published this summer by the Institute for Policy Studies found that in 2021, the average gap between CEO and median worker pay jumped to 670-to-1. That is not a typo: The average CEO received $670 in compensation for every $1 the worker received. And that is an 11% increase from the 2020 ratio of 604-to-1!
In addition, U.S. companies announced plans to buy back more than $300 billion of their own shares in the first quarter of this year, and Goldman Sachs has estimated that buybacks could top $1 trillion in 2022.
Simply put, the huge profits are going to CEOs and shareholders, not to the average worker.
As a result, exasperated workers are organizing throughout the United States, with successful union efforts at more than 200 Starbucks across the nation, the historic unionization victory at an Amazon warehouse on Staten Island, the first-ever unionization of an REI store, wins at two Google Fiber stores in Kansas City, a growing effort to organize video game companies and Apple Stores, and undergraduate student workers at Grinnell voting 327 to 6 to unionize, just to name a few.
New data from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) shows the number of filings for union elections is up 56% from October 2021 to June 2022. As of May 2022, petitions for elections for this fiscal year have surpassed 2021.
This flurry of union organizing, led mostly by a new generation of leaders, is a natural reaction to the prevailing economic model that mistakenly holds the maximization of short-term profits for investors/owners as critical to the nation’s economic well-being.
Workers are choosing to unionize because organized labor is the most consistent voice for working people, union and non-union, in the nation.
Unions have fought to improve the rights and protections for everyone who sells his or her intelligence, experience, and strength to employers to earn a living.

Unions are the only institution in our economy whose purpose is to introduce meaningful democracy to the nation's workplaces and to help wage earners attain the American Dream.
Tragically, the American Dream, our aspiration that when we work hard and play by the rules, we can get ahead so that our children will be better off than we are, is in jeopardy.
As President John F. Kennedy said, "Those who would destroy or further limit the rights of organized labor – those who would cripple collective bargaining or prevent organization of the unorganized – do a disservice to the cause of democracy."
Our nation's best hope to empower workers, level the economic playing field, and improve the lives of working families, is through unions.
As history has proven, we all do better when we all do better.
Jim Begley is the director of the William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The views and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Nebraska.

OWH Midlands Voices: Home visitors helped me turn my life around and helped me be a better parent

Two years ago, I was in rough shape. I was homeless, addicted to drugs and expecting a baby.
Going to jail and bottoming out in a dark place took me on a detour that was painful and hard, but I came out on the other side in a brighter place. I couldn't have done all this myself and one of the most helpful things that happened to me was getting engaged with the home-visiting program at the Healthy Families Nebraska Panhandle site.
The home visitor who got to know me — and helped me get focused and healthy — quite simply changed my life. She helped me find work, stay clear of drugs and, most importantly, worked with me to become a better mother. It's not easy for me to share all of this, but I'm doing it because I want fellow Nebraskans to understand the value of the home visiting program.
This program is not well-known, but I can say with absolute confidence that it's helping people across the state and creating stronger families and communities at the same time. The largest source of funding for home visiting comes from a federal program known as the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program. It provides funding across all 50 states and many tribal communities as well.
The program was created almost 10 years ago and was intended to bring trained professionals to visit expecting or new mothers in their homes. Visits can come from a nurse, a social worker, an early childhood educator or anyone else trained to provide invaluable support to young parents who may be struggling with the weight of parenthood.
For a variety of reasons, many moms don't often seek out expert care and help; this program addresses that by bringing support directly to the family home. Across Nebraska, the program provides vital services in rural counties like Box Butte, Morrill and Scotts Bluff, but also in more densely populated areas like Douglas and Lancaster Counties.
There are more than 400 home visiting participants across Nebraska in a typical year and many of these families who are visited are at higher risk — they are poor or lack access to good health care or may have other risk factors. In some cases, visitors can help new parents with basics like safe

sleeping practices for them and their newborn. In others, they provide guidance on postpartum care. In every case, home visits are tailored to the individual. Although the program varies in each state and situation, home visits show tangible results across the country.

But here's the unbelievable thing; the entire MIECHV program could come crashing down in September. The federal government created the program, but has yet to reauthorize it—meaning it is on track to expire on Sept. 30. Even if it gets re-approved, there's not currently enough funding to keep pace with the need.

It's my hope that home visiting will continue. I've seen firsthand how effective the program is and I know that — for many people who are going through a hard time — sometimes all they may need is someone to check in with them and tell them they care.

Across Nebraska, I know that we're better when we look out for one another. In the meantime, you will find me working hard — caring for my children, attending college, and studying to be a drug and alcohol counselor — while thanking my home visitor for caring about me enough to believe in me and connect me to the resources to succeed.

Mackenzie Schreiber lives in Scottsbluff and is raising two children.

OWH: Voting quandary

Initially unsure of my gubernatorial primary vote for different reasons, I was disgusted that Jim Pillen refused to participate in the debates. Charles Herbster got my vote because he had the fortitude to do so. I was also wary of the way Gov. Pete Ricketts — whom I have supported in the past — went over the top in support of Pillen. Pillen will not get my vote and Ricketts has lost my favor.

Carol Blood is a fine person, I'm sure. However, my vote will not be cast for her. What a quandary. We need to do better, Nebraska.

Rick VanRoy, Omaha

Philadelphia Inquirer: Getting SNAP shoppers online is a win for food security and superstores. For corner stores and bodegas, not so much

The push for recipients of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, to shop online has been hailed by anti-hunger activists as a win-win solution to food insecurity.

One out of every 10 households lacks access to affordable, healthy food on a consistent basis. Supermarkets, they say, will offer greater convenience and better access to healthier food while reducing stigma by providing the same customer payment experiences as non-SNAP consumers.

But trying to keep pace with stores like Walmart and Amazon, who are already providing online SNAP shopping, will severely burden the hundreds of less tech-savvy neighborhood corner stores and bodegas, often one of the only grocery providers in low-income areas.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service, the federal agency that administers SNAP, has been running its Online Shopping Pilot program since 2017, starting with seven states. Because of COVID, the pilot was quickly expanded and is now in 48 states. ALDI, Walmart and BJ's Wholesale Club are among the stores offering the online shopping service in both states.

However, the USDA acknowledges small store owners will face serious technical and financial hurdles as they try to meet the online shopping approval requirements and risk being at a competitive disadvantage because they lack the necessary e-commerce infrastructure.

In May, the USDA FNS reported three million SNAP households shopped online that month, up from 35,000 two years earlier.

"I think it is a good idea. The first people who come to my mind are mothers with newborn babies who could order things and not have to leave the house," said Obed Borrayes, who has owned Esperanza Grocery Store in Camden, New Jersey, for seven years and is a member of La Asociación de Empresarios Unidos.

"And it is very important for small businesses to keep advancing with technology and not get behind," added La Asociación president Franklin Hernandez, owner of Luz Supermarket in Pennsauken, New Jersey.

To add online capacity, grocers, even those already approved to accept SNAP for in store purchases, will have to complete a separate application process. They will also have to make significant changes to their websites.

"The local corner stores, most of them are not very sophisticated and do not have the inventory management and control systems that will be necessary [for online retailing]," said Michael Fienman, a Philadelphia lawyer who specializes in helping small grocery store owners navigate accusations of SNAP retailer violations. "They will have to be willing to put their whole inventory online, and many don't even have websites," Fienman said.

In addition, they will have to contract with a third-party processor for encryption of the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Personal Identification Number (PIN) — the debit card that is used by SNAP recipients — as well as ensure secure transaction processing and certify and test changes to their online shopping site.

It's a daunting list for the average bodega or corner-store owner. Fienman added that the difficulties are compounded because much of the relevant information is available only in English.

"It doesn't look discriminatory on its face," said Fienman, "but when you look at the owner and operators of these stores, many are immigrants and English is their second language. It becomes clear that they don't have the ability to read and understand the rules and regulations. Oftentimes in my practice, I am interfacing with the owners' children or with their accountants who have the language skills."

"No way they can navigate the system to apply to be a food stamps [retailer]. They must pay an accountant to do it," agreed Somaly Osteen, program manager for the Asian American Chamber of Commerce. Osteen works with Asian merchants, many from Cambodia, in southeast Philadelphia.

And online shopping would be subject to technical problems that could severely harm small grocers. A national glitch on Sunday not only left 1.8 million Pennsylvanians locked out of their benefit but 1,609 local stores unable to accept EBT purchases for hours. "There have been outages before but usually only for an hour," said State Rep. Danilo Burgos. "I have never seen an outage for this long, and the USDA didn't communicate with anyone." In 1994, Burgos, a former bodega owner, cofounded the Dominican Grocers' Association of Philadelphia. Burgos said some owners allow customers to take the products and pay after EBT was restored.

This summer the USDA FNS announced a $5 million competitive grant for an organization to help independent retailers and grocers expand their use of online shopping. The winner will be announced in the fall.
SNAP is the country's largest private-public partnership with the government providing about $70 billion annually for 41 million people. Because of the pandemic, the average monthly benefit is now $218, up from $130 per person.
Large superstores like Walmart redeem $8 out of every $10 spent on SNAP.
About 80% of the 250,000 approved retailers are small stores, many of which need to provide EBT services because their customer base is highly dependent on SNAP. According to Information Resources Inc., 12% of all food and drink sales in 2020 (excluding bakery, produce, and deli) were SNAP sales, which totals $74 billion.
Osteen estimated that EBT spending, which is limited to purchasing approved foodstuffs such as meat, dairy products, vegetables, and fruit, is at least 30% to 40% of a small grocer's bottom line. Losing their SNAP customer base would be a fatal economic blow for small stores.
"Without accepting SNAP EBT, maybe I could keep the store running, but the business would be very different. Too many customers rely on EBT," said Hernandez, adding that when stores lose the ability to accept SNAP EBT, most owners shutter the business.
Borrayes explained that SNAP customers would only buy items in a non-EBT accepting store that they "really, really needed and couldn't go someplace else to buy it." Otherwise, they would go elsewhere.
"A store without EBT, a customer will just walk to the next store that accepts EBT," Osteen agreed.
"Basically, you have to work longer hours because EBT is paying for a worker," added Jonathan Hernandez, co-owner of Junior Supermarket in Camden.
The USDA FNS issues retailer approvals, investigates violations, and applies sanctions. According to the latest statistics, USDA FNS permanently disqualified almost 1,600 SNAP retailers in fiscal 2021 for violations, the majority of which are small business.
A year ago the USDA FNS announced that 28 Philadelphia retailers were suspected of violating the rules, including 11 that were selling ineligible items to an undercover agent.
SNAP payment technology has come a long way from the booklets of blue and orange paper stamps that gave the program its original name.
When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act at the end August 1964, he made what was a pilot program into a permanent part of his antipoverty plan. "As a permanent program, the food stamp plan will be one of our most valuable weapons for the war on poverty," Johnson predicted.
The next payment innovations were the EBT cards that were first tested in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1984 and ushered in the digital age.
Now the USDA FNS is planning a mobile payment pilot that would allow SNAP participants to use a mobile device to make SNAP purchases.

AP: States' plans to make school safer reflect political divides

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — In the aftermath of the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, governors around the country vowed to take steps to ensure their students would be kept safe.

Months later, as students return to classrooms, money has begun to flow for school security upgrades, training and other new efforts to make classrooms safer.

But the responses have often reflected political divisions: Many Republicans have emphasized school security spending, while Democrats have called for tighter gun control.

At every step, the actions have stirred debate over whether states are doing the right things to address the scourge of school shootings.

In a special legislative session in Arkansas last month, lawmakers set aside $50 million for a school safety fund proposed by Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson. The rules for distributing the money haven't been finalized, but Hutchinson has said he wants it to help implement recommendations from a school safety commission he reinstated following the May shooting in Texas, where 19 students and two teachers were killed.

The shooting "served as a reminder that the threat of violence in our schools has not abated," Hutchinson said. "It continues to be real, and we have to act with a renewed sense of urgency to protect our children."

Texas was among several other states that set aside money for school security. Gov. Greg Abbott and other top Republican leaders announced $105.5 million for school safety initiatives. Nearly half of that was slated for bullet-resistant shields for school police and $17.1 million was for districts to purchase panic-alert technology.

Other Republican governors who made money available for security upgrades include Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, who announced $100 million for school security three days after the Uvalde shooting, and Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, whose state is giving $2.6 million to increase training capacity and classes for school resource officers.

"While these are the latest measures we're taking to ensure our children's safety, I can assure you they will not be the last. I will work with anyone, even in the midst of a heated election cycle, to protect our students," Kemp, who is running for reelection, said in June.

Some of the Republican governors who have moved aggressively to bolster school security have ruled out any kind of gun control measures.

Hutchinson had said there should be a conversation about raising the age to purchase an AR-15-style rifle — the type of weapon used in Uvalde — but didn't pursue such a measure during the session.

Abbott also has pushed back on calls for more gun control by families of the Uvalde shooting victims.

Oklahoma Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt vowed to fight any firearms restrictions when he signed an executive order on training for law enforcement and risk assessment at schools.

In California, which already had some of the nation's toughest gun laws, Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom has signed a dozen more this legislative session and even took out ads in Texas newspapers criticizing the state's stances on guns.

"We're sick and tired of being on the defense in this movement," Newsom said in July.

In New Jersey, Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy signed legislation last month requiring the state's nearly 600 school districts to set up assessment teams aimed at stemming violence in schools. One of the bill's sponsors recounted hearing of an Uvalde victim who pretended to have been killed in the attack to escape the shooter.

"Does anybody want to teach this — how to play dead?" Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt, a Democrat, said during a hearing in June.

Despite the partisan divisions on gun violence, a group of governors says it will attempt to find

common ground. A task force created by the National Governor Association following the Uvalde shooting will develop recommendations to stop mass shootings, with an emphasis on school safety. Hutchinson, a former chairman of the association, has said the task force will focus in part on how states might use money coming to them through the bipartisan gun control bill President Joe Biden signed in June.

Teachers, political opponents and others have raised questions about the scope and effectiveness of state leaders' plans.

In Arkansas, Democratic lawmakers questioned whether districts taking the new grant program's money would be required to have an armed presence on campus, one of the initial recommendations from the state's school safety commission.

"It's one thing to say 'school safety,' but that runs the gamut of so much," said Democratic Sen. Linda Chesterfield, a retired educator and the only legislator to vote against the grant program. "What specifically do you have in mind, and what price is it going to cost? I guess I'm just tired of having to fly by the seat of my pants and not know a thing about what's going to go into that (commission's) report."

In Ohio, teachers unions say one-time funding that's for equipment like door locks and radio systems — but not ongoing needs like personnel — is helpful but not enough.

Schools need money for staffing, too, including for safety and mental health personnel, said Scott DiMauro, president of the Ohio Education Association.

"Ideally, you're gonna use funding to ensure that every school that wants to hire well-trained school resource officers, as part of their school safety plan, can do that," DiMauro said. "And from that perspective, you know, the $100 million isn't going to solve the problem in the long run."

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