From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 12-3-20
Date: Thursday, December 3, 2020 8:20:40 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Dec 2020	4.03	-22.00	08:09
Corn	Oct 2021	3.68	-40.00	07:59
Milo	Dec 2020	4.90	65.00	08:09
Milo	Oct 2021	4.13	5.00	07:59
Soybeans	Dec 2020	10.92	-69.00	08:09
Soybeans	Oct 2021	9.45	-90.00	08:06
Wheat	Dec 2020	4.87	-64.00	07:59
Wheat	Jul 2021	5.00	-60.00	08:03

TV and Radio
NCN: Ricketts decided not to withhold CARES Act funds in July, didn't tell counties
KETV: 'Help is on the way': Nebraska could get over 100,000 doses of vaccine by year's end
KMTV: Ricketts provides tentative COVID vaccine distribution timeline
KTIV: Gov. Ricketts: Nebraska could get first virus vaccine doses by mid-December
10/11: Governor lays out COVID-19 vaccination plan for Nebraska
WOWT: Nebraska's EMS teams to be among first to get COVID-19 vaccine
KETV: 'It will be a gradual process': Infectious disease doctor talks about return to normalcy with a COVID-19 vaccine
KMTV: CDC reduces 14-day quarantine recommendation to 7-10 days
NPR: Stock Sales By Leaders At Coronavirus Testing Company Raise Legal Concerns

Governor
AP: ACLU agrees to drop lawsuit against Nebraska's prison system
Fremont Tribune: Lawsuit challenging conditions in Nebraska prisons dismissed
Scottsbluff SH: State Sen. John Stinner looks ahead to legislative session
Politico: Karl Rove, GOP building money machine for Georgia runoffs
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LJS: Ricketts may consider economic assistance for Nebraskans if Congress fails to act
OWH: Nebraskans in highest-priority group could start getting COVID-19 vaccinations in two weeks
AP: Nebraska could get first virus vaccine doses mid-December
KLKN: GOV: Tentative COVID-19 vaccine plan
WOWT: Nebraska planning to have COVID-19 vaccine in next few weeks
WJAG: Nebraska to receive COVID vaccine soon
NET: State Resumes Notifying Close Contacts After Catching Up On 2,600-Case Backlog

AP: Nurses wanted: Swamped hospitals scramble for pandemic help

Coronavirus
OWH: After two public hearings, Papillion will vote on a mask mandate Thursday
Fremont Tribune: Recently enacted health directive 'would just be extremely hard to prosecute', Getzschman says
GII: Police will respond to complaints about noncompliance with mask mandate
LJS: Lancaster County reports 3 additional COVID-19 deaths
Platte River Radio: South Heartland District Health Department Reports 3 New COVID Related Deaths; Risk Dial Drops

State, Local and Regional
LJS: Chief notes restraint shown by Lincoln officers in riot response, says force was justified
OWH: Fragmented company to come together on huge Papillion site
OWH: Pitch Pizzeria pays over $93,000 in back wages after labor violations

Opinion
OWH Editorial: Omaha must find a viable legal balance in managing street protests
OWH Editorial: Global Water for Food Institute is a good example of NU vision
OWH Preston Love Jr.: Attack ads and big spending don't get to the real world underlying political campaigns
OWH Public Pulse

1. Burden of proof
2. The judges aren't impartial
3. President's strong achievements
4. Fischer's troubling silence
5. Fairness: Do the math
6. Why I wear a mask
7. Coach needs to grow up

LJS Editorial, 12/3: COVID-19 widens gaps in care for those with disabilities
LJS Letters

1. The simple math of COVID
2. Cornerstone of society is care

Scottsbluff SH: Gov. Ricketts needs to roll back measures

National/Federal
AP: Fed reports slowing US economic activity due to virus surge

AP: ACLU agrees to drop lawsuit against Nebraska's prison system

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A civil liberties group is dropping its lawsuit accusing the Nebraska prison system of fostering inhumane conditions, but it says it will continue to fight against overcrowding and perpetual understaffing of the state's lockups.
The American Civil Liberties Union of Nebraska and attorneys for the state this week filed a joint motion to dismiss the federal lawsuit. The move came after a judge in June denied the ACLU's request to certify the lawsuit as a class action.
The ACLU filed the lawsuit in 2017 on behalf of 11 prisoners against the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services, its director, Scott Frakes, and various prison system officials. Class-action status

would have extended the suit to include more than 5,000 inmates in the prison system.
The lawsuit alleged that the state's prison system violated inmates' constitutional rights through the excessive use of solitary confinement and through gross negligence of their medical and mental health issues. It also took issue with the system's persistent inmate overcrowding and "dangerous" understaffing.
David Fathi, the ACLU's lead attorney on the case and director of the group's national prison project, said Tuesday that the court agreed there were serious issues in Nebraska's prison system, but that its order denying class action certification forced a change in strategy.
"The work doesn't end here," Fathi said. "It takes a new direction. Until Nebraska gets serious about reducing overcrowding, problems will continue to plague the prison system."
Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts called the dismissal a win for taxpayers.
"It is a defeat for anti-public safety interests who have been seeking a mass release of inmates for years," Ricketts said.

Fremont Tribune: Lawsuit challenging conditions in Nebraska prisons dismissed

A federal lawsuit filed on behalf of state prison inmates against the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services will be dismissed.
A joint filing Monday by the ACLU of Nebraska and the state dismisses the case without prejudice, meaning plaintiffs retain the ability to refile the lawsuit. The dismissal also stipulates that each side will cover their own costs of litigation.
The lawsuit challenged conditions in Nebraska's overcrowded and understaffed prison system, arguing that prisoners were being deprived of critical medical and mental health care, suffering serious harm through overuse of solitary confinement and being discriminated against because of disabilities.
Those claims would violate the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act.
ACLU of Nebraska Executive Director Danielle Conrad has said the case was about mass incarceration, racial justice, disability rights and basic humanity in a system that touches every corner of the state.
Nebraska prisoners and the ACLU were dealt a legal blow in June when U.S. District Judge Brian Buescher denied the attempt by the 11 inmates who filed the suit to get class-action status to extend it to more than 5,000 inmates in the state prison system.
Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson said allowing an entire class of inmates to participate in the suit would have dramatically increased the cost of the lawsuit.
David Fathi, lead attorney on the case and director of the ACLU National Prison Project, said that although the court agreed there were serious issues in Nebraska's prison system, its order denying class certification forced a change in strategy.
"The work doesn't end here," Fathi said. "It takes a new direction. Until Nebraska gets serious about reducing overcrowding, problems will continue to plague the prison system."
From advocacy to legislation to litigation, the team will keep working to ensure fundamental rights don't stop at prison walls, he said.
The team includes the ACLU of Nebraska, the ACLU National Prison Project, Nebraska Appleseed, the National Association of the Deaf, and the law firms DLA Piper and Rosen Bien Galvan & Grunfeld LLP.
Taylor Gage, spokesman for Gov. Pete Ricketts, said the dismissal of the lawsuit is a testament to the hard work of Corrections staff and a win for the taxpayers of Nebraska.
"It is a defeat for anti-public safety interests who have been seeking a mass release of inmates for years," Gage said.
Ricketts remains committed to working with Director Scott Frakes and the Department of Corrections to

protect public safety, he said.
The motion to dismiss comes after progress addressing the lawsuit's concerns, the ACLU said.
The Corrections Department closed the Nebraska State Penitentiary's "South 40" solitary confinement unit after expert testimony called conditions there among the worst in the nation.
The average daily population of people in solitary confinement significantly decreased. A new state law diverts people from solitary confinement if they have a serious mental illness, are pregnant, are developmentally disabled, have a traumatic brain injury or are a minor.
Some plaintiffs in the case moved back to the general population after long terms in solitary confinement.
Americans with Disabilities Act policy changes took effect in November. They improved the request and appeal process, refined systems for identifying disabilities and established explicit guidelines that should help end the practice of moving people with disabilities to more-restrictive cells solely because there aren't accommodations in less-restrictive areas. The department is also creating disabilities coordinator positions at each facility.
At least one of the named plaintiffs has received better access to American Sign Language interpreters.
The department adopted new policies related to mental health last year.
It made significant changes to its dental policy, improving access by removing barriers such as requiring that people must be in custody for two years before they become eligible for dentures.
By Noah Johnson

Scottsbluff SH: State Sen. John Stinner looks ahead to legislative session

If there is one certainty for the upcoming legislative session, it's that the 2021 session will be uncertain. Between COVID-19, redistricting and the realities of a budget year, the 90-day legislative session will likely be packed wall to wall with legislation, according to Gering's Sen. John Stinner.
Stinner headlined a Pre-Legislative breakfast on Wednesday, a normally in-person event hosted by the Scottsbluff/Gering United Chamber of Commerce.
Stinner — along with Gov. Pete Ricketts who gave a pre-recorded statement at the start of the event — lauded the omnibus LB 1107 as a significant improvement. LB 1107 was a last-minute compromise and marriage of three bills: Tax relief, business incentives and money for a University of Nebraska project. The bill was proposed and rushed to the final reading.
From his perspective, Ricketts pointed to the budget as a major piece of legislation to watch for in 2021.
"We're not going to have the ability to spend at will, but we're not going to have to make some of the tough decisions that other states are," Ricketts said.
Still, Stinner opened his remarks by acknowledging the still-present coronavirus pandemic. Stinner reiterated Ricketts' remarks in his portion of the event and said that the coronavirus will likely still be around in April and possibly May, despite recent vaccine developments.
"Follow the CDC guidelines and please stay safe," Stinner said.
Stinner also gave a public "thank you" Panhandle Public Health Director Kim Engel for her work.
"I'm glad that you're still upright," he said.
Most of Stinner's comments focused on the upcoming budget. He said he was looking forward to the upcoming forecasting boards to get a better picture of the government's spending.
He also said he was proud of the passage of the land bank bill.
"That took me four years," he said. "I stuck with it because I thought it was significant legislation for rural Nebraska."
Stinner said the land bank system allows blighted properties to be improved with lower burdens. He said that the system was a big gain for communities in western Nebraska.

The legislative session begins on Jan. 6.
By Justin Garcia

Politico: Karl Rove, GOP building money machine for Georgia runoffs

Republicans are digging deep into donor pockets as they fight to protect their endangered Senate majority, with the price tag for two Georgia runoffs already eclipsing $300 million, putting them among the most expensive elections ever.

Party officials have tapped into the full national network of Republican donors with an aggressive schedule of fundraising events, in-person and conducted over Zoom, that have already yielded tens of millions of dollars. Significantly more money is expected in the coming weeks as the GOP ups its fundraising goal, according to internal party memos and event schedules obtained by POLITICO.

The Georgia Battleground Fund — the joint fundraising committee fueling the National Republican Senatorial Committee and the campaigns of Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler — has already deposited $31 million after three weeks of activity, according to a memo this week from Karl Rove, the veteran GOP operative leading the effort. The effort is sending Loeffler and Perdue as much money in weeks as some GOP senators raise in months — a necessary boost for their campaigns as Democrats outspend them in Georgia.

Rove wrote in the memo that his committee had increased its initial fundraising goal by about 20 percent, to nearly $43 million in total. That would require the committee to raise roughly $2.4 million per week in the run-up to the Jan. 5 races.

Six fellow senators are helping meet the increased goal, appearing on state-specific Zoom fundraisers for the joint fundraising committee this week and next week, according to a copy of scheduled events for the fund. Rove is listed on the schedule as appearing at more than a half-dozen events.

None of the Georgia campaigns or outside groups has yet filed reports with the Federal Election Commission detailing their activity since the November election, so the overall fundraising picture remains unclear, and the joint fundraising committee is just one piece of the total fundraising effort for both campaigns. But Democrats across the country raked in record amounts for the 2020 elections — and, so far, the Democratic campaigns have significantly outspent Republicans on TV, according to data from AdImpact.

Democrat Jon Ossoff, who is facing Perdue, and Raphael Warnock, who is challenging Loeffler in the special election, have combined to outspend the two Republicans on TV, $40 million to $19.5 million since Nov. 3, according to the AdImpact data. Both Democrats also have more booked on the airwaves for the final five weeks of the race so far. GOP outside groups have made significant investments to match or exceed the total Democratic spending. But the campaigns get much better rates with TV stations, making those hard dollars more valuable.

Overall, past and future advertising spending in the two races has already topped $300 million, and both races are likely to be among the most expensive Senate contests in history, even over just two months.

“The Democrats will go all out, and the Republicans will do what they can to match them. It is a legitimate titanic struggle,” said former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who represented an Atlanta-area district during his time in Congress.

Perdue and Loeffler will appear at a major fundraiser Thursday at the Atlanta Braves’ ballpark, according to three people familiar with the event. An invitation obtained by POLITICO also lists GOP Sens. Mike Crapo of Idaho, Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott of South Carolina, and Todd Young of Indiana, the NRSC chairman, as special guests for the Thursday fundraiser.

Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) and Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts would appear at a Zoom fundraiser

on Thursday, a spokesman for Sasse confirmed. A Zoom fundraiser next Monday will feature Sens. Joni Ernst and Chuck Grassley of Iowa appearing together, according to a copy of scheduled Georgia Battleground Fund events.

Already, the fund has sent $11 million to the two campaigns and $15 million to the NRSC, which spent big on coordinated ads, independent expenditure ads and resources for the vast ground game, according to the memo.

Rove's memo said the joint fundraising committee has more than 400 bundlers, with tiers ranging from those who have helped raise $50,000, to several who have helped raise more than $1 million.

"Let's all step up the pressure for the three weeks left before Xmas!" he wrote.

Young, the NRSC chairman, and Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, the incoming chairman for the 2022 cycle, are co-headlining an event in Jacksonville next week, according to the schedule. Scott is also appearing at a virtual Zoom fundraiser Friday for the joint fundraising committee, along with Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, a member of GOP leadership, and Larry Kudlow, the president's top economic adviser, according to a copy of an invitation. Barrasso is doing a second fundraiser that day for Loeffler's campaign, according to a person familiar with the event.

"Everyone is singing from the same sheet of music, which is encouraging," said one Republican working on the runoffs, requesting anonymity to discuss the party's efforts.

Alongside the hard dollars for the campaigns and committee, outside groups have poured significant money into the runoffs already. Senate Leadership Fund and American Crossroads, two groups led by allies of Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, have already spent or booked $80 million combined for the races. Their Democratic counterparts, The Georgia Way and Georgia Honor, have invested nearly $17 million so far. The Democratic groups are buying ad time weekly and have not yet booked a full amount for the totality of the campaigns.

"The amount of money flowing into Georgia's political system is unprecedented, and it's all hands on deck for everyone," said Scott Reed, a veteran GOP operative.

In addition to fueling the massive ad spending, the fundraising is helping the GOP pour resources into its ground game in an effort to turn out voters, even as the party struggles with an intraparty feud that some worry could turn off some of the president's supporters and hurt turnout efforts. Democrats have kicked off their own get-out-the-vote campaign on the ground, returning to door-knocking with precautions to turn their voters back out.

Rove acknowledged the Democratic efforts in his memo but said it "takes time to get to scale: We have a jump on them and expect more volunteers" after President Donald Trump visits the state for a rally this weekend. So far, the party has canvassed 540,000 households with more than 848,000 targeted voters, according to the memo.

"This is a tough battle that requires all hands on deck to ensure Sens. Perdue and Loeffler have the financial resources they need to win," Jesse Hunt, a spokesman for the NRSC, said in a statement. "Democrats are going to throw every dollar they have at us, and we appreciate the great team of leaders that's helping our side compete."

Former Rep. Jack Kingston (R-Ga.), who narrowly lost the 2014 Senate primary to Perdue, said there is a point of "diminishing returns" on ad spending with the state fully saturated with commercials. But he said there's always other avenues where the fundraising is beneficial, including multiple contacts with potential voters.

"You can't saturate the playing field with volunteers. Having paid staff to go out and do some of that street walking, you can spend it all day," Kingston said. "This isn't really a persuasion campaign anymore. It is get out the vote."

By James Arkin

NET: Stock Sales By Leaders At 'Test Nebraska' Testing Company Raise Legal Concerns

An NPR investigation has found two board members of the company providing COVID-19 tests to Nebraska sold nearly $1 million worth of company stock and then didn't publicly disclose it before the legal deadline.

The state's Test Nebraska program is a $27 million contract with several companies based in Utah. The head of the consortium said in April that none of the companies involved would make money off of the testing.

One of those companies is Co-Diagnostics, which provides the re-agents used to test samples for COVID-19. As NPR reports, two Co-Diagnostics board members sold their shares in May, soon after the share price surged with the announcement of Test Nebraska and similar partnerships in Utah and Iowa.

Gov. Pete Ricketts says he's very pleased with the Test Nebraska program and has no concerns about Co-Diagnostics.

"This is a free service to the people of Nebraska that's allowed us to expand testing greatly here in our state," Ricketts said. "Certainly when we the state were making the decision about bringing them on board, being a volunteer effort was not part of our calculus in this, it was about whether they were going to be able to deliver the testing to the citizens of Nebraska."

Co-Diagnostics is facing a lawsuit from investors who say the company's claims of a 100% accurate test were blatantly fraudulent.

The company stands by its internal verification process. Both the CEO and CFO of Co-Diagnostics sold all their company shares last week, and neither currently hold direct stock in the company.

Nebraska health officials say Test Nebraska accounts for about half of all COVID-19 tests in the state so far.

By Becca Costello

LJS: Ricketts may consider economic assistance for Nebraskans if Congress fails to act

Gov. Pete Ricketts on Wednesday hailed the approaching arrival of COVID-19 vaccines this month as a long-awaited signal that "help is on the way," and said he would consider providing some form of state economic assistance to Nebraskans if Congress remains deadlocked and the federal government fails to act.

"That is something we will take into consideration," the governor said in answer to a question at a coronavirus news briefing.

Ricketts said he is hopeful that Congress will act, but "we will take a look at what additional resources we may need to provide as we move forward" if Washington remains politically paralyzed.

Several states, including Michigan, Minnesota and Colorado, have recently enacted state programs to meet needs prompted by the pandemic and its impact on the economy.

Those actions have been directed at unemployment benefits, rental and utility assistance and stimulus checks.

Ricketts said the state could begin to see Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine flow in during the week of Dec. 14, with 15,600 doses expected in the initial allocation.

If Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine is also approved, as expected, its shipments could begin during the week of Dec. 21.

Nebraska could receive more than 100,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines this month, according to Angie Ling, who is coordinating the program for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Those doses will be allocated almost entirely to health care workers and nursing home residents, the two groups deemed to have the highest priority for vaccinations by the federal government's advisory

committee on immunization practices earlier this week.
The next phases of priority groups are expected to include essential workers, older adults and people with preexisting health conditions.
The general population is not likely to be fully vaccinated until spring or early summer.
Asked about himself, Ricketts said he is not on any priority list and would anticipate receiving the vaccine "sometime in the spring."
"I will have no qualms about taking the vaccine," the governor noted.
Ricketts said there will be a communications campaign that attempts to assure people about the safety of the vaccine while informing them about potential side effects.
Since most of the vaccines that are being developed require two doses to become maximally effective, there are concerns that some people might not return for the second vaccination unless they are adequately prepared to anticipate side effects.
Asked when Nebraskans could anticipate "a return to normal," Ricketts said "maybe in April, maybe sometime in the summer."
The governor said the state has "caught up" with a backlog that developed in its program of contacting people who may have been exposed to the virus by a relative or acquaintance.
Statewide, the number of new cases has slowed slightly but cases are surging at a rate that ranks Nebraska behind only Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming in new cases per capita over the past week, according to the New York Times.
Deaths in Nebraska crossed the 1,000 mark this week, with the Department of Health and Human Services announcing nearly 100 deaths in a span of just two days.
As mask mandates pop up in more cities and towns across the state, Ricketts said he has not changed his position on the possible denial of future federal stimulus funding to county governments if they deny services to a citizen who refuses to wear a mask.
"If any citizen gets denied services because of a mask, that would create a problem," he said.
By Don Walton

OWH: Nebraskans in highest-priority group could start getting COVID-19 vaccinations in two weeks

LINCOLN — Nebraska health care workers could start getting vaccinated for COVID-19 in less than two weeks, state officials said Wednesday.
Barring any glitches, all of the roughly 90,000 front-line health care workers could get their first round of shots by the end of the month. That includes staff in hospitals, long-term-care facilities, home health, primary care clinics and emergency medical services.
Speaking at a press briefing, Gov. Pete Ricketts and Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services officials added some definition to the vaccination effort ahead as the country awaits federal approval of the country's first COVID vaccines.
Emergency approval of a vaccine made by Pfizer and German biotechnology company BioNTech could come as soon as Dec. 10. A second vaccine, developed by Moderna, could follow within a week. The timeline depends on how quickly the federal Food and Drug Administration acts after a panel of independent advisers reviews data about the vaccines.
If approval comes late next week, Angie Ling, incident commander for the HHS public health division, said that Nebraska could receive an initial allotment of 15,600 doses of the Pfizer vaccine the week of Dec. 13 and that health care workers could start getting them within hours.
"It is vitally important that those on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic stay as healthy as possible and that we reduce their chances of spreading the virus," she said.

The vaccines are being distributed to states based on their share of the nation's adult population. Ling said the state expects to get 19,500 doses of Pfizer vaccine and 32,100 of the Moderna vaccine the week of Dec. 20, with an additional 23,400 doses of Pfizer vaccine and 14,200 doses from Moderna coming the last week of December.

That's 104,800 doses potentially headed for Nebraska yet this year, enough for those in the top priority group under the state's distribution plan, Ricketts said. That group, labeled Phase 1a, includes only health care workers.

Phase 1b will focus on people who are more vulnerable to the coronavirus, such as nursing home residents, people age 65 and older, and people with certain medical conditions. It also will include essential workers, such as teachers and school staff, correctional workers and food processing workers.

The governor declined to estimate when the state would be able to start giving vaccinations to the 1b group. He said the general population might have to wait until April for a vaccination.

Ricketts said he expects that he will have to wait for a vaccine, as a member of the general population. But he said he would have no hesitation getting a vaccination, once it has won FDA approval. Some studies have suggested that large numbers of people are skeptical about the COVID vaccine.

"It's important to know that help is on the way, hope is out there," Ricketts said.

The governor also noted that people must get two shots within about a month of each other for full benefit. The federal government plans to distribute second doses in January for the Nebraskans who get their first shot in December.

Dr. Gary Anthone, the state's chief medical officer, said the FDA is still analyzing data to determine how soon a person would be considered immune to the coronavirus after getting the second vaccine dose. It is too early to know how long the immunity could last.

An initial version of the state vaccine distribution plan was released in late October. A revised version with more detail about who, where, when and how of distribution is due to the federal government Friday. Ricketts said emergency medical services personnel were not part of the 1a group in the initial plan but were shifted into that group after more consultation.

One key consideration with the Pfizer vaccine is that it must be kept at ultra-low temperatures, 94 degrees below zero, until shortly before it is used. An HHS map shows that most of the ultracold freezers in Nebraska are in the eastern third of the state. Ricketts said that means the Moderna vaccine may be better suited for use at hospitals and clinics farther west. That vaccine needs to be kept at only a few degrees below zero.

A separate HHS map identifies health care facilities that will be doing vaccinations. The list includes hospitals, local public health departments, federally qualified health centers and Indian Health Services clinics across the state. There is at least one vaccine provider in each public health region.

Also on Wednesday:

Contact tracing. Ricketts said the state has nearly erased the backlog of contact-tracing cases. He said that people who test positive are being contacted within a day now and that contact tracers have started reaching out again to people who had close contact with positive cases.

The backlog built up when HHS did not bring on more tracers as the number of cases started soaring. To help catch up, the state stopped having tracers call close contacts.

Relief funds. The governor said he would consider using state funds to help people hurt by the economic effects of the pandemic if no new federal relief legislation is passed. In the meantime, he said he is talking with members of the state's congressional delegation. Congressional leaders have not been able to reach agreement on additional relief proposals so far.

By Martha Stoddard and Jeffrey Robb

AP: Nebraska could get first virus vaccine doses mid-December

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska could gets its first shipments of a coronavirus vaccine in less than two weeks if the proposed drug wins federal approval, but health care workers will be given first priority and the general public may not get access until April, state officials said Wednesday.

Gov. Pete Ricketts said the state tentatively expects to receive 15,600 doses of a vaccine produced by the drug manufacturer Pfizer the week of Dec. 13. Another 19,500 doses from the company are slated to arrive the following week, plus 32,100 doses from manufacturer Moderna if the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approves that company's drug.

State officials are planning to receive more than 100,000 doses by the month's end. With roughly 34,000 medical personnel in the state as of 2018, according to a University of Nebraska Medical Center report, and each person requiring two vaccine doses taken several weeks apart, that would account for many of the doses the state expects to receive this month.

"Help is on the way," Ricketts said at a news conference to discuss the state's pandemic response.

Nebraska's distribution plan, unveiled in October, places health care workers at the front of the line for a vaccine once it becomes available.

Health care workers who will get the first doses include doctors, nurses, ancillary hospital workers and others who are often exposed to coronavirus patients, said Angie Ling, incident commander for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Elderly and vulnerable residents will also get priority.

Ling said more residents will qualify for a vaccinations as the supply grows, but "it's vitally important that those on the front lines of the pandemic stay as healthy as possible."

A surge in cases over the last month is putting a huge strain on health care providers, and Ricketts has warned that he will impose tighter social-distancing restrictions if available hospital capacity continues to drop.

The state's vaccine distribution plan was developed because it's likely to take months to produce and distribute enough of the vaccine for everyone.

Moderna has said its vaccine appears to be 94.5% effective, while Pfizer reported that its version looks to be 90% effective.

Meanwhile, the state reported 62 more coronavirus deaths on Tuesday and nearly 2,000 more cases of COVID-19.

The state confirmed 1,080 deaths and 1,787 new virus cases, for a total of 130,194 cases of the virus since the pandemic began.

The number of people hospitalized with the virus declined again Tuesday to 869 from the previous day's 907. That total is now more than 100 people lower than the record of 987 that was set on Nov. 20, but it remains nearly four times higher than the level it was at two months ago when 232 people were hospitalized.

Nebraska continued to have the sixth-highest rate of infection in the nation on Tuesday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Nebraska decreased over the past two weeks, going from 2,292.86 new cases per day on Nov. 17 to 1,783.71 new cases per day on Tuesday.

By Grant Schulte

KLKN: GOV: Tentative COVID-19 vaccine plan

LINCOLN, Neb. (KLKN)- Gov. Ricketts and Nebraska health officials held a press conference Wednesday morning in regards to the COVID-19 vaccination plan for Nebraska.

Angie Lee, from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, spoke on the phases of

vaccine distribution in the state.
"Due to the limited COVID vaccine, immunizations programs have been encouraged to utilize a phase approach to the vaccine allocation," Lee says. "It's vitally important that those on the front lines of the pandemic stay as healthy as possible and that we reduce their chances of spreading the virus. This is why the first allocations will focus on health care personnel."
Phase 1 A of the vaccination distribution plan is estimated to begin mid-December, around the 13th. Lee gave these projected dates and number of doses of each vaccine (Pfizer and Moderna) for vaccine allocation:

- Dec. 13-19: 15,600 of Pfizer vaccine
- Dec. 20-26: 19,500 of Pfizer and 32,100 of Moderna vaccine
- Dec. 27-32: 23,400 of Pfizer and 14,200 of Moderna
- **Estimated total doses for Phase 1 A of immunization: 100,000**

Phase 1 A is estimated to be around 90,000 people. Who are the 90,000 people projected to receive the first doses of the vaccine? Health care workers. Lee gave an exact breakdown of who the Phase 1 A recipients will be:

- Health care providers
- Nurses
- Ancillary staff in direct contact with the virus
- Home health care workers
- Pharmacies
- Emergency Medical Services workers
- Other health care staff

Gov. Ricketts says they are working towards distributing the vaccine statewide come springtime. Additional phases are set to come as more doses of the vaccine come.
The vaccine comes in two doses, Ricketts emphasized the importance of taking the second dose to receive the 95% efficacy immunity from the vaccine.
If you have already been diagnosed with coronavirus, Ricketts says to "be on the safe side" and still get a vaccine when the time comes.
By Emily Larson

WOWT: Nebraska planning to have COVID-19 vaccine in next few weeks

LINCOLN, Neb. (WOWT) - Gov. Pete Ricketts and Angela Ling, incident commander for Nebraska's Department of Health and Human Services, shared details Wednesday about Nebraska's COVID-19 vaccination plans.
Pending FDA approval of the vaccines, Nebraska is expecting more than 100,000 COVID-19 vaccinations in the next few weeks, Ling said.
Pfizer's first shipment of 15,600 vaccinations is expected to arrive the week of Dec. 13, with 19,500 expected sometime between Dec. 20-26, and 23,400 more the week after that. Moderna is planning to ship and 32,100 vaccines to Nebraska the week of Dec. 21, and 14,200 the following week. Ling said that these were forecasted numbers, and could change.
The first vaccines will be given to healthcare providers, nurses, ancillary staff, home healthcare, pharmacies, EMS, and other healthcare staff that are exposed to patients and infectious materials, Ling said.
"It's vitally important that those on the front lines in the fight against the pandemic stay as healthy as possible and that we reduce their chances of spreading the virus," she said.
As more vaccines are allocated, more Nebraskans will receive them, she said.
The state's distribution plans are currently based on the population of Nebraskans ages 18 and older —

not on the state's Census numbers — because the vaccination is not expected to be distributed to children for now, Ricketts said.
The state has also increased COVID-19 testing capacity in Omaha and Lincoln.
The number of deaths linked to the coronavirus jumped 62 in Nebraska on Tuesday as the state reported nearly 2,000 more cases of COVID-19. The state reported 1,080 deaths and 1,787 new virus cases Tuesday to give Nebraska a total of 130,194 cases of the virus since the pandemic began.
The number of people hospitalized with the virus declined again Tuesday to 869 from the previous day's 907. That total is now more than 100 people lower than the record of 987 that was set on Nov. 20, but it remains nearly four times higher than the level it was at two months ago.
By Gina Dvorak

WJAG: Nebraska to receive COVID vaccine soon

LINCOLN - Nebraska's COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan was highlighted Wednesday.
During a press conference Angie Ling, Incident Commander for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services said if both Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are approved, the state can expect just over 100,000 doses by the end of the year.
"December 13-19 we are anticipating the Pfizer vaccine of 15,600 (doses). The week of December 20-26 we are anticipating Pfizer vaccine 19,500 and Moderna 32,100. The week of December 27-31 Pfizer vaccine 23,400 and Moderna 14,200."
Ling said they're still going with the phased approach in distribution and the first allocations will focus on healthcare personnel including EMS.
Governor Pete Ricketts added the general public most likely won't get the vaccine until April.
By Nick Stevenson

NET: State Resumes Notifying Close Contacts After Catching Up On 2,600-Case Backlog

Nebraskans are no longer being asked to notify their own close contacts after testing positive for COVID-19.
The state health department temporarily stopped calling those close contacts about two weeks ago as part of the contact tracing process in order to catch up on a backlog of about 2,600 cases.
Gov. Pete Ricketts said Wednesday that backlog is taken care of and normal contact tracing procedures have resumed.
"The folks that maybe are not getting called on the day their test result comes in are the ones that come in later in the day," Ricketts said. "We are getting to those folks, though, the majority of those calls on the day they come in and we are resuming calling those close contacts."
Most contact tracing is handled by regional health departments, who are able to contact the state team for help. Both state and regional contact tracers were overwhelmed with the recent surge in COVID-19 cases.
New cases of the virus are down about 30% over the past 14 days, but experts say another surge is likely in the two to three weeks after Thanksgiving.
By Becca Costello

AP: Nurses wanted: Swamped hospitals scramble for pandemic help

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — U.S. hospitals slammed with COVID-19 patients are trying to lure nurses and doctors out of retirement, recruiting students and new graduates who have yet to earn their licenses

and offering eye-popping salaries in a desperate bid to ease staffing shortages.
With the virus surging from coast to coast, the number of patients in the hospital with the virus has more than doubled over the past month to a record high of nearly 100,000, pushing medical centers and health care workers to the breaking point. Nurses are increasingly burned out and getting sick on the job, and the stress on the nation's medical system prompted a dire warning from the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
"The reality is December and January and February are going to be rough times. I actually believe they are going to be the most difficult time in the public health history of this nation," Dr. Robert Redfield said.
Governors in hard-hit states like Wisconsin and Nebraska are making it easier for retired nurses to come back, including by waiving licensing requirements and fees, though it can be a tough sell for older nurses, who would be in more danger than many of their colleagues if they contracted the virus.
Some are taking jobs that don't involve working directly with patients to free up front-line nurses, McMillan said.
Iowa is allowing temporary, emergency licenses for new nurses who have met the state's educational requirements but haven't yet taken the state licensing exam. Some Minnesota hospitals are offering winter internships to nursing students to boost their staffs. The internships are typically offered in the summer but were canceled this year because of COVID-19.
Methodist Hospital in Minneapolis will place 25 interns for one to two months to work with COVID-19 patients, though certain tasks will remain off-limits, such as inserting IVs or urinary catheters, said Tina Kvalheim, a nurse who runs the program.
"They'll be fully supported in their roles so that our patients receive the best possible, safe care," Kvalheim said..
Landon Brown, 21, of Des Moines, Iowa, a senior nursing student at Minnesota State University, Mankato, recently accepted an internship at the Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato. He was assigned to the pediatric unit's medical-surgical area but said he might come across patients with the coronavirus.
Brown's resolve to help patients as a nurse was reaffirmed after his 90-year-old grandfather contracted the virus and died over the weekend.
"The staff that he had were great, and they really took a lot of pressure off of my folks and my family," he said. "I think that if I can be that for another family, that would be great."
The University of Iowa's College of Nursing is also trying to get graduates into the workforce quickly. It worked to fast-track students' transcripts to the Iowa Board of Nursing so they could get licensed sooner upon graduating, said Anita Nicholson, associate dean for undergraduate programs.
Nicholson said the college also scheduled senior internships earlier than normal and created a program that allows students to gain hospital experience under a nurse's supervision. Those students aren't caring for coronavirus patients, but their work frees up nurses to do so, Nicholson said.
"The sooner we can get our graduates out and into the workforce, the better," she said.
Wausau, Wisconsin-based Aspirus Health Care is offering signing bonuses of up to $15,000 for nurses with a year of experience.
Hospitals also are turning to nurses who travel from state to state. But that's expensive, because hospitals around the country are competing for them, driving salaries as high as $6,200 per week, according to postings for travel nursing jobs.
April Hansen, executive vice president at San Diego-based Aya Healthcare, said there are now 31,000 openings for travel nurses, more than twice the number being sought when the pandemic surged in the spring.
"It is crazy," Hansen said. "It doesn't matter if you are rural or urban, if you are an Indian health facility

or an academic medical center or anything in between. ... All facilities are experiencing increased demand right now."

Nurses who work in intensive care and on medical-surgical floors are the most in demand. Employers also are willing to pay extra for nurses who can show up on short notice and work 48 or 60 hours per week instead of the standard 36.

Laura Cutolo, a 32-year-old emergency room and ICU nurse from Gilbert, Arizona, began travel nursing when the pandemic began, landing in New York during the deadliest stretch of the U.S. outbreak last spring. She is now working in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and soon will return to New York.

She said she hopes her work will be an example to her children, now 2 and 5, when the crisis passes into history and they read about it someday.

"If they ask me, 'Where were you?' I can be proud of where I was and what I did," Cutolo said.

Doctors are in demand, too.

"I don't even practice anymore, and I've gotten lots of emails asking me to travel across the country to work in ERs," said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.

The outbreak in the U.S. is blamed for more than 270,000 deaths and 13.8 million confirmed infections. New cases are running at over 160,000 a day on average, and deaths are up to more than 1,500 a day, a level seen back in May, during the crisis in the New York City area. Several states reported huge numbers of new cases Wednesday, including a combined 40,000 in California, Illinois and Florida alone. States are seeing record-breaking surges in deaths, including Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky in the middle of the country. Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said the virus is "spreading like wildfire."

A COVID-19 vaccine is expected to become available in a few weeks, and health care workers are likely to be given priority for the first shots. That could make it easier for hospitals to recruit help.

To make room for the sickest, hard-hit institutions are sending home some COVID-19 patients who otherwise would have been kept in the hospital. They are also canceling elective surgeries or sending adult non-COVID-19 patients to pediatric hospitals.

A hospital system in Idaho is sending some COVID-19 patients home with iPads, supplemental oxygen, blood pressure cuffs and oxygen monitors so they can finish recovering in their own beds. The computer tablets enable nurses to check in with them, and the oxygen monitors automatically send back vital information.

Across the U.S., hospitals are converting cafeterias, waiting rooms, even a parking garage to patient treatment areas. Some states are opening field hospitals.

But that does nothing to ease the staffing shortage, especially in rural areas where officials say many people aren't taking basic precautions against the virus.

Dr. Eli Perencevich, an epidemiology and internal medicine professor at the University of Iowa, said health care workers are paying the price for other people's refusal to wear masks.

"It's sending everyone to war, really," he said. "We've decided as a society that we're going to take all the people in our health care system and pummel them because we have some insane idea about what freedom really is."

By Grant Schulte and Amy Forliti

OWH: After two public hearings, Papillion will vote on a mask mandate Thursday

After two consecutive nights of public debate over a potential mask mandate in Papillion, the City Council on Wednesday decided to sleep on it before taking a vote.

About 40 people on Tuesday and Wednesday showed up to debate the proposed mandate, which as written would require those ages 5 or older to wear masks in many indoor places. It includes the exemptions that many Nebraska cities have included in their mask mandates.

The Papillion Board of Health has recommended the mask mandate.
The council needed a supermajority of six votes to waive a third reading and vote Wednesday, but only five members voted for that option. Councilmen Jason Gaines, Steve Sunde and Bob Stubbe voted against taking an immediate vote.
A final vote is scheduled for Thursday.
Medical experts and educators showed up Wednesday to support the mask requirement. Two educators — Bret Brasfield, president of the Papillion La Vista Community Schools board, and Jared Wagenknecht, vice president of the Papillion La Vista Education Association — said widespread mask-wearing has helped keep teachers and students in the classroom.
"Our schools are only as safe as the conditions in our community," Wagenknecht said.
Austin Blankman, a Papillion-La Vista South High School graduate who now works as a nurse in Des Moines, said he made the drive home specifically to speak in support of the mandate.
Blankman spoke of his experience working as a nurse in New York City when the coronavirus was at its worst there. He described horrible, "heartbreaking" 15-hour days watching people succumb to the virus, bodies being stored in refrigerator trucks.
He said he doesn't want to see that scene repeated in Nebraska — and masks are one way to help prevent hospitals from becoming overrun.
More than a dozen people spoke against the mandate. Some questioned the science behind the effectiveness of masks, while others said mandates are pitting community members against one another.
One opponent, laundromat owner Peter Mayberry, was the first person in Omaha to receive a citation for violating Omaha's mask mandate.
Mayberry, who owns Anytime Laundry, said he believes the virus is real but doesn't believe the government should be requiring people to wear masks.
"You're putting people in impossible situations," Mayberry said.
Melissa Panko, a member of Papillion's Library Board, said a high number of people in Papillion already wear masks and questioned why a mandate was necessary.
Councilman Tom Mumgaard said many laws are designed for the minority of people who don't act responsibly.
"One of the obligations we have as elected officials is to lead people to responsible behavior," Mumgaard said.
By Reece Ristau

Fremont Tribune: Recently enacted health directive 'would just be extremely hard to prosecute', Getzschman says

Mayor Scott Getzschman said prosecution for failing to comply with the recently enacted health directive mandating mask usage in Fremont is unlikely during a Tuesday interview.
Getzschman joined Tara Lea, executive director of the Fremont Area Chamber of Commerce, and Terra Uhing, executive director of Three Rivers Public Health Department, during Lea's weekly "Tuesdays with Tara" Zoom call held over Facebook.
The directive was put in place by the Fremont Board of Health last Friday during an emergency meeting. The board, made up of Getzschman, City Councilmember Susan Jacobus, Chief of Police Jeff Elliott and Dr. Richard Seitz of Methodist Fremont Health, passed the directive on a 3-1 vote.
Failing to comply with the directive could be classified as a misdemeanor offense under the city's municipal code, which could result in a fine of up to $1,000 or up to three months in prison.
Despite that, Getzschman said it is unlikely that prosecution from the county attorney, in most cases, is

unlikely.
“It’s a lot more difficult to file charges and you would be warned multiple times before any charges are filed,” he said. “It would just be extremely hard to prosecute.”
The Board of Health has the power to implement such a health directive, Getzschman said during the meeting.
In March, the city enforced a separate directed health measure handed down from Gov. Pete Ricketts, which limited the number of people allowed to gather in a room and required restaurants and bars to temporarily close their dining service.
Getzschman said the board took time to listen to Seitz as he discussed the number of COVID-19 cases entering Methodist Fremont Health.
“We wanted to hear just how booked up the hospital is,” Getzschman said. “What is the capacity of the hospital? Are we gaining ground or are we losing ground?”
He said the hospital is at a point where it is “just stable,” meaning that Methodist Fremont Health can’t afford to take any more patients.
“Typically, by the end of the day, someway, somehow someone is released and then they can bring on another patient but it’s just too close,” Getzschman said.
Tight margins at the city’s hospital, along with concerns raised by the general public due to the lack of a mandate, ultimately led to the directive being enacted.
Implementing a health directive doesn’t mean the mandate has been been codified. Unlike an ordinance that would typically go through city council during the course of three readings before being codified into law, the directive is a temporary action that can be enacted immediately through the board of health.
He said the goal was to introduce the directive, monitor its effectiveness during the following week and ultimately re-convene on Friday to discuss any potential further steps.
“Hopefully we’ll determine whether we need to go further,” he said. “I truly think that the directive is enough and that Fremont can move forward with the directive. I think it’s definitely making a difference in our community.”
By Noah Johnson

GII: Police will respond to complaints about noncompliance with mask mandate

Enforcing Grand Island’s new mask mandate is largely the duty of the people in charge at local businesses.
Grand Island Police Department officers won’t respond to a mask violation unless it has first been brought to the attention of the manager.
“If someone has a complaint about someone not wearing a mask, they are to go to the business manager. That’s the first step,” said Grand Island police Capt. Jim Duering. “So we will respond if a business has already intervened and is not getting compliance.”
Businesses that allow people to not wear masks risk being charged as a public nuisance.
“We will respond if the complaint is against the business not enforcing it,” Duering said. “The property owner of the business is really the first line where most of that should be taking place.”
The citywide COVID-19 prevention ordinance went into effect last week and remains in effect until Feb. 23, unless extended by the Grand Island City Council. The ordinance requires people to wear masks when indoors at premises open to the general public within city limits.
Police have received two or three calls about mask enforcement.
“We’re not responding unless there’s already been some intervention and compliance isn’t being gained,” Duering said. “In most cases, the people either put their mask on or they leave. And it really

doesn't involve the police at that point."
The ordinance doesn't apply to private residences unless they are accessible to the public.
"So I suppose if you're having an open-door party, maybe that would be an issue," Duering said. "But it really is geared toward publicly accessible properties."
People who do not wear masks risk a $25 fine plus court costs, a total of $74.
Children younger than 5 are not required to wear masks.
People also are not required to wear masks while seated at a bar or restaurant when they are immediately having food or drink.
People communicating with other people who are deaf or hard of hearing, or who have a disability or medical condition that makes communication while wearing a face covering difficult, are also exempt, as long as a 6-feet distance or more is maintained.
At fitness centers, people are not required to wear masks while exercising or swimming.
By Jeff Bahr

LJS: Lancaster County reports 3 additional COVID-19 deaths

Local health officials reported three more coronavirus-linked deaths on Wednesday, pushing this week's death toll in Lancaster County alone to 12.
Of the 85 reported deaths locally since the first case was reported in Lancaster County in February, 14% have come this week. At least five of those whose deaths were confirmed this week lived in long-term care facilities.
Those deaths announced Wednesday included a man in his 60s and a man and woman in their 90s, according to a news release.
The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported 298 additional COVID-19 cases on Wednesday afternoon, pushing the local total to 17,453.
Although the number of new cases has slowed from peaks over recent weeks, the positivity rate for test results returned since Sunday stands at 37.4%, the highest mark to date.
There are now 98 residents of Lancaster County hospitalized in Lincoln with COVID-19, and 167 total coronavirus patients.
The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported 2,336 new cases in the state on Wednesday, bringing the total to 132,530. A total of 853 COVID-19 patients are currently hospitalized.
There were 48 COVID-19-related deaths on Wednesday and the total now stands at 1,128.
By Todd Henrichs

Platte River Radio: South Heartland District Health Department Reports 3 New COVID Related Deaths; Risk Dial Drops

HASTINGS – South Heartland District Health Department (SHDHD) officials reported three more COVID-19-related deaths of previously reported cases, bringing the health district total to thirty-three (33). SHDHD does not report deaths until the department receives notification regarding cause of death on the death certificate.
SHDHD Executive Director Michele Bever reported that the deaths were Adams County residents – a man in his 70s who was hospitalized, and two women, one in her 60s and one in her 80s, both with underlying health conditions. "We extend our condolences to these families who lost loved ones to COVID-19," she said.
Bever also reported South Heartland's COVID-19 risk dial remains in the red zone, dropping to 3.0 from 3.3 the previous week. "While the number of COVID hospitalized patients remains high in our district,

the percentage decreased from the previous week and ICU bed availability in the district improved over the course of last week," she said. In addition, there was a dip in overall number of positive tests reported last week to 250 compared to more than 330 the previous week. However, Bever reported that "last week's positivity (percent positive tests) increased to 15.6%, and we received a record 83 positive test results yesterday (Tuesday). These are the factors keeping the risk dial in the red," she said.
Today, hospitals in South Heartland district were caring for twenty-one (21) patients with COVID-19. Overall, 58% of inpatients were COVID-positive and 18% of the staffed intensive care unit beds were available. The district's hospital capacity metrics can be accessed from SHDHD's COVID-19 dashboard.
Bever said there are nine (9) long term care facilities (LTCFs) in the South Heartland district with staff, residents, or both who have tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 2 weeks. LTCFs with outbreaks work directly with a team of professionals with the Nebraska Infection Control Assessment and Promotion Program (ICAP) at the University of Nebraska Medical Center to manage the outbreaks.
As of Wednesday, thirteen school districts in Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties were affected by COVID-19. Overall, there were more than 175 students and staff out from PreK-12 schools including twenty-eight individuals (22 students, 6 staff) in isolation due to testing positive for COVID-19.
Bever said due to high demand for COVID testing in the district, TestNebraska options are expanding in South Heartland's counties. Hastings Convenient Care lengthened hours on Saturdays and added Sunday hours: S/Su 8:45AM – 10:45 AM, and is adding some weekday afternoons. Mary Lanning continues TestNebraska M-F 10AM-12PM, Brodstone Hospital continues MWF 9-10AM, and Webster County Community Hospital is launching a TestNebraska site beginning the middle of December. Check the TestNebraska website (testnebraska.com) for current schedules for all TestNebraska sites. Testing is free through TestNebraska.
The levels of risk for COVID-19 spread are indicated on the risk dial as low (0-1.0, green), moderate (1.0-2.0, yellow), elevated (2.0-3.0, orange) and severe (3.0-4.0, red). The COVID Risk Dial & Community Guidance can be found on SHDHD webpages at www.southheartlandhealth.org. South Heartland District case counts and trends can be found on SHDHD's dashboard of local COVID-19 case statistics. This dashboard, along with updates, guidance, news releases and other COVID-19 information and links can be found on the SHDHD website: www.southheartlandhealth.org. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provides daily updates to Nebraska's coronavirus COVID-19 cases on their Data Dashboard at http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Coronavirus.

LJS: Chief notes restraint shown by Lincoln officers in riot response, says force was justified

A review by Lincoln police of the five days of unrest arising from protests last summer found several tactical shortcomings but determined nearly all force used was justified.
Police documented nearly 300 instances between May 29 and June 2 when officers used force in response to rioting that erupted from what had been peaceful protests over the killing of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer.
Over those five days, members of the Lancaster County Sheriff's Office, the Nebraska State Patrol and Nebraska National Guard joined Lincoln police in efforts to secure government buildings, protect protesters and break up unruly crowds, sometimes deploying tear gas, rubber bullets and pepperballs.
The review of hours of video from police, surveillance cameras in the area, news media and social media sources found no criminal actions by law enforcement, Police Chief Jeff Bliemeister told reporters at a briefing Wednesday.
But small groups of violent protesters used the cover of the crowds to throw rocks, glass bottles, gasoline and fireworks and shoot paintballs, BBs and even bullets at officers during late-night demonstrations, police said.

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"There was remarkable restraint shown by Lincoln police officers; there was resiliency shown," Bliemeister said. "And it really goes back to all of our staff were focused on (affording) an opportunity for individuals to protest police violence that had occurred across the country."
Only one of the 38 instances where Lincoln police officers used force over the five days violated department policy.
In that case, an officer targeted by fireworks did not properly identify the culprit before firing a rubber bullet in response, the chief said.
The officer involved was disciplined but no longer works for the department for reasons unrelated to the use-of-force investigation, the chief said.
The Sheriff's Office and State Patrol also reviewed actions of law enforcement during the protests but did not provide detailed reports to the Journal Star.
The review by Lincoln police noted members of multiple agencies fired rubber bullets in response to criminal activity, but Assistant Chief Brian Jackson said LPD's investigation couldn't directly attribute any significant injuries to a specific agency or officer.
Several protesters, including a woman whose nose needed to be stapled back on, have filed tort claims against the city seeking unspecified damages for the injuries they suffered.
The five nights of unrest prompted the first deployment of Lincoln's riot control unit, called its Field Force Team, in 15 years.
None of the team's members have responded to a similar event during their careers. The last events similar to the five days of unrest in Lincoln came in 1975, following the killing of Sherdell Lewis by a Lancaster County Sheriff's deputy, according to police.
Though the Field Force Team trains annually, it has not trained for events lasting as long as the ones it experienced last summer, Jackson said.
Lincoln Police Department officials provided a nearly three-hour presentation about their review to reporters Wednesday, though they redacted some information involved in ongoing criminal investigations, civil lawsuits and sensitive law enforcement tactics.
Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird, Lincoln City Council members, Lancaster County commissioners and members of the city's police oversight board received similar briefings in small groups earlier this year.
Asked for her response by the Journal Star, Gaylor Baird said the police department's review of the unrest, riots and its response reaffirmed the great work of Lincoln police and showed its commitment to improvement.
She remains confident the police department is prepared to appropriately respond to any future events.

Lessons learned

Posting armored officers outside the Hall of Justice, as police did May 30 and 31, wasn't valuable, and standoffs between the Field Force Team and protesters only escalated things, the review found.
Because police buildings had become targets in other cities, law enforcement monitoring those developments focused on preventing damage to the Hall of Justice, which houses the Lincoln Police Department and Lancaster County Sheriff's Office.
Having armored officers standing in front of the building didn't deter crime, Jackson said.
The Journal Star reported Wednesday that six shots were fired into the Hall of Justice as officers stood in front of the building May 30, and rioters shot into a nearby building and set fires and broke windows at other buildings along Lincoln Mall while police were present, causing several million dollars' damage, he said.
But on June 1, law enforcement leadership decided to keep officers inside, and though a crowd formed outside the building, it broke up after one demonstrator threw a bottle at the Hall of Justice, the

assistant chief said.
Entering the days of unrest, Lincoln police officers had not expected to become the target of violence, the chief added.
'"I don't think we were as prepared as we could have been," Bliemeister told reporters Wednesday.
In hindsight, Jackson said police should have collected some of the projectiles thrown at them to help communicate to the public the threats they faced.
And Bliemeister said the decision to wait months to publicize that an officer had been shot at during the protests followed the department's typical approach.
"We release information to identify those that are responsible for crimes, not to say 'I'm a victim of a crime,'" the chief said.
Because the law enforcement response encompassed several agencies, Lincoln Police say future responses should ensure outside agencies understand the mission and plan, he added.
Additional video footage, audio support and lighting could also help during times of unrest, the review found.
To that end, police stationed mobile lights outside of the Hall of Justice surrounding Election Day as national concerns of potential unrest hung in the air.
Nationwide, similar riots last summer prompted some legislators to consider banning the use of tear gas by police.
And while video of law enforcement using tear gas and foam bullets to disperse crowds on Lincoln streets shook up some residents and local policymakers, the city recently moved to purchase additional rounds of tear gas and other crowd-dispersal munitions.
On Wednesday, Bliemeister said the tools they used to disperse crowds played a pivotal role after requests for people to leave failed and as violence and destruction continued.
"Does it work? Yes, and that’s why it’s used," Councilman Roy Christensen said, as he pushed back against the narrative that a peaceful protest was wantonly tear-gassed.
Councilwoman Sändra Washington and Councilman Bennie Shobe, who are Black and each grew up on the heels of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, said they had concerns after seeing the images of law enforcement using tear gas and rubber bullets those nights.
But the review by police demonstrated to them the threats officers needed to react to in real time, both said.
"It is hard to watch tear gas and rubber bullets being used," Washington said. "But in instances where police feel threatened, I really want the least harmful methods for crowd disbursement to be used."
Scott Hatfield, a bar owner who serves on the mayor's Citizen Police Advisory Board, said he, too, was initially skeptical of the actions by law enforcement.
But Hatfield said he left his briefing feeling the department took an honest look at the actions of its officers, adding they did the best they could under difficult circumstances, especially considering someone in the crowd is believed to have shot a high-powered rifle in their direction.
Lincoln police have specific use-of-force policies and have made them publicly available, Hatfield said, including policies requiring deescalation, banning certain neck restraints and requiring warnings before firing a weapon.
Katie Ryan of Campaign Zero, a Colorado-based nonprofit advocating for best practices in policing, said Lincoln is in compliance with seven of eight policies the group calls "basic protections against police violence."
Ryan added that Lincoln should be commended for making its policies public.
"The use-of-force policy, or the response-to-resistance policy, is essentially a contract that outlines how officers should engage with the community," Ryan said. "It's a public document, and there's no reason the way officers are expected to operate in the community should be under a cloak."

Sheriff's Office conducted own review

The Lancaster County Sheriff's Office performed its own review looking at the department's tactical response during protests, but Chief Deputy Ben Houchin declined the Journal Star's request to see it.

"We did learn a lot as a department, but we don't want out in public what our strategies are," Houchin said in an interview last month.

Houchin said the review highlighted some things the sheriff's office would do differently, but added deputies would respond to similar events in much the same way.

Criticized for a May 31 scuffle where he appeared to pull two women down by their hair in front of the Hall of Justice, the chief deputy said he wishes none of that would have occurred.

If people would have obeyed the 8 p.m. curfew, Houchin said "a lot of that would have been resolved."

"By no means did any of us in law enforcement want it to get to that point," he said.

But officers could not ignore what happened a night earlier, when millions of dollars of damage was done to buildings along Lincoln Mall.

There's no playbook for responding to events like that, Houchin said.

So law enforcement worked to clear the area using chemical agents, then aimed bean bag rounds and 40-millimeter foam rounds at individuals they said were "causing issues," according to Houchin.

The order was to use those options on someone who was about to, in the process of, or who had just thrown a bottle or rock toward officers.

"Thank God, as an agency and as a community, we don't have a whole lot of experience in dealing with those kinds of things," he said. "And we did learn from those things about how we are going to respond to them."

State patrol: 'No policy violations'

Nebraska State Patrol spokesman Cody Thomas said the agency deferred to Lincoln Police and the Lancaster County Sheriff's Office in its response to the events of May 30-June 1.

"However, NSP did conduct a review of NSP operations during that time period and found no policy violations," Thomas wrote in an email.

A request from the Journal Star for more information about the internal review went unanswered.

The patrol also denied a public-records request seeking a copy of its policy for using tear gas, foam bullets and other nonlethal munitions, citing an exemption in state law for "when the records constitute ... strategic or tactical information used in law enforcement training."

The Journal Star appealed to the Nebraska Attorney General's Office, which upheld the denial.

Capt. Jason Scott, in an affidavit to the attorney general's office, said releasing the policies would allow "the public to equip themselves with certain items that can make our less-lethal options ineffective."

Experts who study policing say the argument that making use-of-force policies public could jeopardize the safety of officers is tenuous, however.

Justin Nix, an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, said the best practice is to make policies outlining when and what force can be used easily accessible.

That was a recommendation that came out of the Obama Administration's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, Nix said.

"The one thing that sets policing apart from all other professions is that we authorize officers to use force (i.e. violence) when necessary," Nix said in an email. "But how can we hold agencies accountable if they keep their policies hidden from us?"

Nix noted that many police agencies, including those in Lincoln and Omaha, do make their policies readily available.

By Riley Johnson, Chris Dunker and Lori Pilger

OWH: Fragmented company to come together on huge Papillion site

A fast-growing Omaha company currently spread throughout 14 buildings, including a former roller skating rink, has landed a spacious new home that will put its 200-plus workers under one roof.
Midwest Laboratories, founded 45 years ago, has announced that it will move to the 27-acre Papillion campus that Infogroup evacuated earlier this year when COVID-19 hit.
Infogroup leaders opted to sell their tailor-made property and pivot to a mostly virtual operation.
The decision by Midwest Labs to take over the 176,000-square-foot facility southwest of Cornhusker Road and 72nd Street has Papillion officials thrilled.
Mayor David Black said he was worried initially that such a big corporate headquarters — rare in that it is the largest single-floor office building in the metro area — might sit empty for years.
"It's just a huge win," he said, to have a "solid, family-owned Nebraska-based business" come forward in that short amount of time.
For Midwest Labs, the consolidated location is hailed as an opportunity for greater efficiencies and quality control of tests it conducts on farm soil, plants, pet and human food, fuel and more.
No longer will employees have to run carts or tote materials between buildings clustered on three different blocks, said second-generation owner Brent Pohlman, who took the reins from father Kennard Pohlman. The younger Pohlman said he took his dad to tour the facility this week, and his dad was amazed.
"He said, 'I've never seen a laboratory this big in my life.' I think he was a little overwhelmed by the whole thing."
Substantial construction is ahead to transform the sprawling complex with numerous meeting areas and 1,100 outdoor parking stalls into a functional lab. But chief executive Pohlman described it as the perfect place for continued growth of the company whose head count jumped by 100% in the past two years.
Business bumped up despite the pandemic, in part because of a contract with Costco's new chicken plant in Fremont, Pohlman said. He said, for instance, that hand sanitizer demand led to an uptick in alcohol testing, and more at-home dining increased food testing.
Indeed, he said, the company of 208 full-time employees added another work shift and nearly 100 seasonal, temporary workers to handle the boom.
"We are busting at the seams."
Unlike many employers contemplating heavier reliance on virtual operations when the pandemic clears, Pohlman said Midwest Labs wants to unite its workforce.
"After all that we have been through during this pandemic, working remotely, and limiting exposure of employees by reducing our contact across campus, the goal is to bring everyone back together as one family on one campus," he said.
This is the company's second move since launching in 1975 in three rooms of a building at 120th Street and West Center Road. Five years later, Midwest Labs moved to its current headquarters, 13611 B St.
Over the following four decades, the company bought up multiple properties in a three-block radius, most recently the SkateDaze building and Steamfitters & Plumbers hall, said Kayla Simms, director of sales and client relations.
Collectively, the campus structures provide testing and analysis for agriculture, pet food, human food and beverages, fuel and environmental industries.
With continued growth expected — Pohlman foresees hiring up to 100 more full-timers within five years — the company studied various on-site renovations including building a tunnel system. The cost was too high, Pohlman said.
He said the one-story configuration of the facility at 1020 East 1st St. in Papillion's Business and

Technology Park is ideal for lab processing.
The property was on the market for $8.8 million, though Pohlman declined to reveal the price paid. He said the company continues to receive tax breaks awarded years ago through the Nebraska Advantage Act but did not seek additional local incentives.
Midwest Labs currently is seeking an architect and evaluating how best to use the space. Construction and renovation are to take place over the next few years with transition to be complete by 2025. Pohlman said there would be no disruption of services in the meantime.
Papillion's mayor said the suburban city's newest corporate resident should benefit ongoing efforts to redevelop its downtown. He said that having a couple of hundred employees less than a mile away is a plus for restaurants, shops and civic activities.
"They're a very highly respected Nebraska business," Black said. "Proud to have them."
Pohlman said the company's growth trajectory could mean a 24/7 operation in the future. Simms said the company typically brings on 400 new clients a month.
"We're really focusing on growth, on building and sustaining what we can do," Pohlman said. "We're in an exciting time."
By Cindy Gonzalez

OWH: Pitch Pizzeria pays over $93,000 in back wages after labor violations

Pitch Pizzeria has paid 55 employees a total of $93,304 in back wages to resolve violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act's overtime requirements, according to a U.S. Department of Labor press release.
In an investigation, the department's Wage and Hour Division found violations at all three Pitch locations, two in Omaha and one in Scottsdale, Arizona.
The restaurant's parent company, United Holding Group LLC, also paid a penalty of $2,049 for violating child labor provisions of the labor standards act.
The investigation found multiple violations of overtime rules. It also determined that the company was breaking child labor requirements by employing 15-year-olds to work past 7 p.m. and for more than three hours on school days, the press release said.
The labor department said Pitch failed to accurately report hours employees worked as well as bonuses and tips received.
Attempts to reach an official at United Holding Group were not immediately successful.
By Betsie Freeman

OWH Editorial: Omaha must find a viable legal balance in managing street protests

The Constitution's requirements sometimes present government leaders with headaches. They must make sure that state and local laws pass constitutional muster, and when a law fails that test, it must be rewritten. That appears to be the case with the City of Omaha's current ordinance that bans protesters from obstructing city streets.
The Omaha ordinance is quite similar to a St. Louis ordinance that a federal judge ruled unconstitutional this year, Douglas County Judge Marcena Hendrix said last week. Citing that legal background, Hendrix struck down the Omaha ordinance, calling it "overly broad" and in too great a conflict with constitutionally protected speech rights under the First Amendment.
The ordinance that Hendrix struck down in dismissing charges from July against 25 Black Lives Matter demonstrators makes it "unlawful for any person purposely or knowingly to obstruct any highway or other public passage, whether alone or with others, without being licensed or privileged to do so."
It's entirely sensible — and warranted — for a municipality to have an ordinance in place to prohibit the

protracted blocking of public rights of way by demonstrations. At the same time, such legal restrictions must steer clear of trampling on the First Amendment.
Omaha is appealing Hendrix's ruling. Unless her decision is overturned, the best course for Omaha is to find a viable model law and adopt it here. It's important to strike the needed balance.

OWH Editorial: Global Water for Food Institute is a good example of NU vision

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the University of Nebraska's Daugherty Water for Food Institute, which has earned a global reputation for cutting-edge research and cooperative projects to better understand water science and strengthen agricultural sustainability.
Since its beginning in 2010, the institute has developed partnerships around the world, with projects in 58 countries. Nations use the institute's detailed Yield Gap and Water Productivity Atlas to improve crop production, water use and land use planning. The institute's drought vulnerability assessment training has helped a wide range of countries.
The institute provides NU leaders with a long-term lesson on how to structure strategic initiatives in effective ways to open up new academic opportunities and contribute constructively to society. NU identified a key niche (water science/water policy) in which it excels. It established a major public-private partnership with Valmont Industries. It built contacts and partnerships nationally and worldwide. Now it's recognized as a global leader on water issues, with the momentum still building.
This is a notable example of Nebraska vision and achievement, to be studied and emulated.

OWH Preston Love Jr.: Attack ads and big spending don't get to the real world underlying political campaigns

For the 2020 general election campaign, I had a special opportunity to observe my Nebraska communities from a unique viewpoint.
As an African American Democrat in a predominately Republican state and as an emergency U.S. Senate candidate for a brief 50 days, raising less than $5,000 and lacking adequate time to create a campaign structure, my candidacy was unusual, to say the least. But in that time, I witnessed the complexity, the frailties and yet potential of our time, in this very splintered world. I was able to see our Nebraska communities in all of our rawness.
My campaign theme was simple and intended to have a charm by the use of my name: "There Needs to be Love in the Senate." But a takeaway of my campaign is that adding love to our policy is a profound and serious need.
A real world lies beneath a campaign. Whether it be the campaign for Senate or any other office, the realities are sitting there waiting for attention. Campaigns focusing on attack ads, wonderful television advertising of make believe, raising and spending vast amounts of money, overlook the deep, real-world needs of many.
During my journey, I interacted and spoke with people enduring horrible stress, mental health challenges and pain in communities all over Nebraska because of COVID, poverty, lack of jobs, lack of food, health disparities, incarceration and lack of knowledge about available resources. It all contributes to the growth of hopelessness. A bitter lesson.
In meeting Nebraskans over the past two months, I noted:
• The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, driving a significant desire of voters not to go to the polls, or even focus on the rigors, dangers and responsibility of voting.
• The impact of the leader of our executive branch of government. No matter what your party affiliation, pro or con to Trump, I would guess that we all can agree that the injection of misinformation

and personal-tics instead of poli-tics made this a most unusual election.
• Racial division, captured in the concept of Black Lives Matter, death of Blacks at police hands and manifested in the heightened demand for justice, change and reform, and fueled by the rise of White supremacists and anarchists, who would love to see the races not only divide, but go to war and tear this country to shreds.
• Worry about the re-emergence nationally of what could be called "the New Jim Crow of Voter Suppression," which in some states includes targeted purging of voter rolls, threats to the Postal Service's delivery of voter mail, increased voter intimidation, undermining confidence in the voting process and saying the election would be "fixed," reduction in polling places and drop boxes in some states — all creating a threat to democracy.
To be a candidate for the U.S. Senate in the midst of all these historic factors was a strange destiny. The clarity that arose for me was that, simply, there is a great human need for hope, healing, reconciliation of our differences, and yes, love.
The clear lesson of my journey is the need to change. It was entirely unpredictable that my humble, moneyless write-campaign would receive a Nebraska record 62,000 write-in votes. It is remarkable, but clear, that my votes represented a peephole into the hearts and minds of many, who used my campaign as a way to cry out. A cry to campaigns, "You don't need to waste money and waste the voters' time attacking and spending." That in spite of the all the efforts to retard voting, we voted in record numbers as a sign, a cry for help. If we as communities do not address the cries now, sexism, injustice, racism, hate and poverty will reign supreme.
A call to action: We need public, private and grassroots leadership. We must stop dancing around solutions to the raw needs so easily seen in our communities. Together we can close the gaps of jobs, justice, divisiveness, disparities, opportunity, equity and inclusion. Come together, committed but knowing there is struggle in change. Reach out to credible and trusted sources. I suggest we take a mental inventory of how far we have come and how little progress we've actually made since the last breath of George Floyd. I will also say this in closing, that in words of James Weldon Johnson, creator of the anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," we should "Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us," and "Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us." Let's make history.
Preston Love Jr. is a longtime Omaha civic engagement activist who also teaches black studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. His role as a community columnist was suspended during his write-in Senate campaign, which came after the Nebraska Democratic Party disavowed primary winner Chris Janicek and endorsed Love.

OWH: Fairness: Do the math

Gov. Pete Ricketts was reported in the World-Herald Dec. 1 as favoring a one-candidate-take-all Electoral College system for our fair state. Under existing rules, Nebraska allots its votes minimally proportionally, with one vote going to the winner of each congressional district, and two more going to the winner of the state as a whole. Thus, in the 2020 election, four votes were allotted to Donald Trump and one to Joe Biden, who won the 2nd District, where most of the voters live in or near Omaha.
Rickets justified the appeal of the take-all system as "more fair to our voters in the state." What does the governor mean, exactly, by "fair"? About 330,000 people statewide voted for Biden (39.1%). Is it "fair," in Gov. Ricketts' calculus, to give Trump — who received 58.7% — 100% of Nebraska's Electoral College votes? Even with a system the governor believes is "unfair," Biden received only 20% of Nebraska's electoral votes.
If we really want to be fair, and give each vote equal weight, try this electoral math: zero to 20% equals one vote; 20 to 40% equals two; 40 to 60% equals three; 60 to 80% equals four, and 80 to 100% equals

five. That formula would make Nebraska a shining light of fairness, proportional representation, and one person, one vote. What could be “more fair”?
Bruce E. Johansen, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 12/3: COVID-19 widens gaps in care for those with disabilities

COVID-19 didn't create the chasm between society's haves and have-nots, but it did expose it while also revealing the fault lines that threaten to further widen this divide.
A recent survey by Disability Rights Nebraska found higher risk and less support for people with mental and physical disabilities in the midst of the pandemic.
Disability Rights Nebraska had been investigating conditions for nine months and last week released its report and call for action on the needs still affecting too many Nebraskans.
It also found areas of weakness in high-density areas like the state's correctional institutions and its meatpacking plants -- places that are inhabited by many people of color and were hit hard by the coronavirus.
The survey provided a harsh look at how people living in the care of the state -- group homes, assisted-living facilities and nursing homes and prisons -- have been impacted by the pandemic.
Tania Diaz, legal director for Disability Rights Nebraska, said that the state left behind people with disabilities and the impact, she added, has been fatal.
According to the report, the shortcomings appear in many forms -- from people not having reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious food to critical staffing shortages in facilities that house people with disabilities. In addition, there have been challenges in getting staff workers the personal protective equipment needed to keep them safe.
Society has a responsibility to look after the impoverished while meeting the needs of the at-risk segment of our population. However, merely shutting them off from society as a means of protecting them is not the perfect solution, one facility administrator said in the survey.
"You can just see them wilting from the lack of human interaction," the administrator said. "And while staff is trying hard, we can't be in everyone's room enough to make up for their family and friends."
The virus has created a pick-your-poison type of dilemma that has made an already-challenging job seem impossible.
There are important lessons to be gleaned from the tragedies of 2020.
This "Widening Divide," as the report is named, should prompt leaders to take corrective measures.
Targeting dense living conditions and work environments and overcrowded classrooms would go a long way toward mitigating the spread of viruses -- not just during the pandemic but each year during flu season.
Learning from the heartache of 2020 -- especially in state-run facilities -- can be a silver lining to this dark cloud that the coronavirus has brought.
It's the first step to narrowing a gap that has led to too much tragedy.

Scottsbluff SH: Gov. Ricketts needs to roll back measures

Monument Prevention Coalition has joined other coalitions across the country to call on governors to roll back temporary measures put into place in response to COVID-19 that expanded alcohol availability across the country, including two Executive Orders issued by Governor Ricketts in March. The first allows curbside pickup of alcohol and the second expanded alcohol-to-go to cocktails and other mixed drinks. These exemptions must be reversed as soon as businesses return to normal operations.
Nebraska ranks among the top five worst states in the country for its rates of binge drinking and self-

reported drunk driving. At a time like this when mental health is increasingly important, we should be reducing alcohol availability given that studies have reported higher rates of depression, suicidal ideation, and domestic violence during the pandemic. Alcohol is a risk factor for all of them.
The alcohol industry will surely try to capitalize on this moment and push for these changes to be made permanent next year when new legislative bills are introduced. Monument Prevention Coalition strongly supports strengthening science-based policies to prevent further harms from alcohol. We'd urge community members to share their thoughts on this issue with Senator Tom Briese, who chairs the committee that deals with alcohol policy, via e-mail at tbriese@leg.ne.gov or at 402-471-2631.
Lanette Richards
Executive Director
Monument Prevention Coalition

AP: Fed reports slowing US economic activity due to virus surge

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Federal Reserve survey of business conditions around the country found that economic activity in several regions slowed in November as coronavirus cases surged.
The Fed report released Wednesday said that overall, the Fed's 12 regional banks characterized the economic expansion as "modest or moderate." But it noted that three Midwest regions and the Philadelphia region reported activity had begun to cool in early November as COVID-19 cases surged. Four districts reported "little or no growth" during November, while five others reported that activity remained well below pre-pandemic levels in some sectors.
Kathy Bostjancic, chief U.S. financial economist for Oxford Economics, said the latest Fed survey showed the recovery continues to be uneven across many sectors of the economy.
The report said that among the sectors doing better were manufacturing, housing construction and existing home sales. But banks said there had been deterioration in their loans, particularly those to retailers and the leisure and hospitality industries.
The report said that most districts found that local businesses' optimism has "waned," with many citing concerns about the wave of virus cases and renewed lockdown restrictions. The report also said there was concern about the looming expiration dates for government support programs, including extended unemployment benefits and the moratoriums that have been in place on evictions and foreclosures.
The report, known as the beige book, will be used by Fed officials when they hold their last meeting of the year on Dec. 15-16 to discuss possible changes to the central bank's interest-rate policies.
In response to the deep recession brought on when the virus struck with force in March, the Fed slashed its key interest rate to a record low and began buying billions of dollars in Treasury bonds and mortgage-backed securities to put downward pressure on long-term rates.
The Fed is expected to maintain its ultra-low interest rates over the next three years. But it may also decide as soon as this month's meeting to expand the support it is providing through its bond purchases, especially if Congress is unable to pass further economic relief legislation in the lame-duck session.
At a congressional hearing Wednesday, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said that increased support from Congress is needed as a bridge between the current economic troubles and the time next year when a virus vaccine is expected to be widely available.
The new Fed survey said that while employment increased during November, the pace of job gains was slow at best.
Many of the Fed's business "contacts noted that the sharp rise in Covid-19 cases had precipitated more school and plant closings and renewed fears of infection, which have further aggravated labor supply problems," the report said. "Providing for childcare and virtual schooling needs was widely cited as a

significant and growing issue for the workforce, especially for women."
The Fed survey said that the staffing issues had prompted some companies to extend greater accommodations for flexible work schedules.
The Philadelphia district reported that sharply rising COVID-19 cases in November had "heightened concerns over anticipated layoffs, foreclosures, evictions and bankruptcies."
The Fed's St. Louis regional bank, meanwhile, reported that conditions had deteriorated toward the end of November, while the Minneapolis region reported a softening in consumer demand due to rising virus infections.
The Dallas district said that energy activity remained depressed and business prospects were "highly uncertain due to looming concerns surrounding political uncertainty and the unknown course of the pandemic."

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