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Lincoln Journal Star

State surpasses 1,000 positive coronavirus cases; deaths reported in Douglas, Gage, Hamilton counties

By Todd Henrichs

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Nebraska topped 1,000 on Thursday.

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported 1,066 cases in its Thursday evening update, up 86 from Wednesday evening's total.

Those numbers, however, don't include the latest surge in cases in Hall County, with the local health department reporting 339 cases in its Thursday update. State totals still reflect Hall County at 268 cases.

Two coronavirus-related deaths were confirmed in Health and Human Services' Thursday evening update, including the first death in Hamilton County and the eighth in Douglas County. The department reported two more deaths in Gage County later Thursday night.

In Hamilton County, COVID-19 claimed a man in his 60s with underlying health issues who was a resident of a long-term care facility in Aurora, local health officials said.

The Douglas County man in his 70s who died also suffered from pre-existing health issues.

The Gage County deaths were both at an assisted living facility. The first was a female in her 80s, and the second was a male in his 70s with multiple underlying health conditions.

The later update also reported the first positive test result for an individual in Nance County.

The state has recorded at least 25 deaths associated with COVID-19.

TOP

Platte River Radio

Three New COVID-19 Related Deaths Reported in Nebraska

LINCOLN –Three new COVID-19 related deaths were reported to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Thursday, bringing the state's COVID-19 death toll to 24, according to the agency's COVID-19 Dashboard.

Two deaths were reported in Gage County. Both were residents of an assisted living facility. The first resident was a female in her 80s. The second was a male in his 70s with multiple underlying health conditions. https://www.facebook.com/PHSHealthDept

Douglas County saw its eighth death, that of a man in his 70s with multiple underlying health conditions. https://www.douglascountyhealth.com/

The East Central Public Health Department announced that an individual in Nance County has been diagnosed with the virus, marking that county's first case – https://www.facebook.com/ecdhd/.

Today's state case total, as of 5:40 pm Central Daylight Time, is 1,066. DHHS launched a new data dashboard that updates the state's COVID-19 case totals daily. You can find it at http://dhhs.ne.gov/coronavirus. Local health departments are reporting cases and deaths in their jurisdictions. In the event of a discrepancy between DHHS dashboard data and cases and deaths reported by local public health officials, data reported by the local health department should be considered the most up to date.

All 93 Nebraska counties are now covered by state Directed Health Measures (DHMs). http://dhhs.ne.gov/coronavirus. It's critical that Nebraskans follow these enforceable state Directed Health Measures to help slow the spread of COVID-19 in the state. These measures help protect each other and those who are more vulnerable to severe illness and death, and help hospitals and clinics from being overwhelmed so they can continue to provide care to families, friends and neighbors who need it.

In addition to the state-issued DHM, some Local Health Departments have issued additional restrictions – http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/COVID-19-Directed-Health-Measures.aspx

DHHS supports Governor Ricketts in urging Nebraskans to follow the Six Rules to Keep Nebraska Healthy.

Stay home. No non-essential errands and no social gatherings. Respect the ten-person limits.
Socially distance your work. Work from home or use the six-foot rule as much as possible in the workplace.
Shop alone. Do this only once a week and do not take your family with you.
Help kids social distance. Play at home, no group sports and no playgrounds.
Help seniors stay at home. This can be done by shopping for them. Do not visit long-term facilities.
Exercise daily. Do your best to stay as healthy and safe as you can.
Recent studies show that a significant portion of people with COVID-19 lack symptoms and those who eventually develop symptoms can pass the virus to others before showing symptoms, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC now recommends wearing cloth face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain

(grocery stores, pharmacies, etc.) especially in areas of significant community-based transmission – https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-faq.html.

Cloth face coverings are not a substitute for social distancing. Public health officials continue to emphasize that maintaining 6-feet social distancing is crucial to slowing the spread of the virus.

Here's where to find tools and resources for individuals and families, schools, communities, businesses, healthcare facilities, and first responders on the DHHS website – http://dhhs.ne.gov/coronavirus and CDC's website – https://www.cdc.gov/covid19 .

DHHS opened a statewide COVID-19 information line to help answer general questions and share the latest information and resources with Nebraskans to help keep them informed. The number is (402) 552-6645; hours of operation are 8 a.m.-8 p.m. CST, 7 days a week.

DHHS will continue to update Nebraskans through the DHHS website and on Facebook and Twitter as we have new information. The CDC's website is also a good resource for COVID-19 information – https://www.cdc.gov/covid19 .

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Nebraska coronavirus cases top 1,000; two more deaths reported

By Nancy Gaarder

Nebraska recorded two more deaths from the novel coronavirus on Thursday as the total number of cases surpassed the 1,000 mark.

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported Thursday evening that 1,066 cases have been confirmed in the state.

The two deaths reported Thursday occurred in Douglas and Hamilton Counties. According to state and local figures, that brings Nebraska to 25 deaths.

The latest death in the Omaha metro area involved a man in his 70s who was suffering from multiple underlying conditions, according to the Douglas County Health Department.

In Hamilton County, a man in his 60s who lived in a long-term-care facility in Aurora died, according to the Central District Health Department. This brought the district, which is anchored by Grand Island, to its sixth death.

The Central District leads the state in coronavirus cases, exceeding Douglas County, which is far more populous. The district has recorded 360 cases, of which 339 are in Hall County, where Grand Island is; 15 are in Hamilton County; and six are in Merrick County.

Douglas County now has a total of 266 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and eight deaths resulting from it.

Douglas County recorded three new cases Thursday, said Health Department spokesman Phil Rooney.

They involve people who range in age from less than a year old to someone in their 50s, he said. One of the people has been hospitalized. One of them had contact with someone known to be infected, and the two other cases remain under investigation.

This was the second infant in as many days to test positive in the county. Rooney said he couldn't provide additional information on the two babies, including where they might have contracted the virus and whether they are seriously ill, because of federal privacy laws.

The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported three new cases Thursday, bringing the total there to 62.

Two of Thursday's cases involve women in their 30s and 50s and were acquired in the community.

At least 43 of the county's cases were acquired by moving about the community, the Health Department says.

The third case from Thursday is still under investigation and involves a person in their 30s.

Lancaster County has recorded one death.

TOP

Lincoln Journal Star

Carter Place Senior Living in Blair reopens after COVID-19 shut it down

By JoAnne Young

A senior living facility in Blair that has seen at least 19 coronavirus cases and one death last week reopened Wednesday.

Carter Place Senior Living temporarily closed in late March, and residents moved to neighboring health care facilities and hospitals after both residents and staff tested positive for COVID-19.

The facility brought back seven residents Wednesday, and an Enlivant spokesperson said it planned to bring back others Thursday.

"Beyond April 16th, we plan to welcome remaining residents back as they are deemed appropriate to return by the hospital, which is responsible for determining the schedule of our residents' return, based on their symptoms and testing protocols," the spokesperson said in an email sent by owner Enlivant's public relations firm.

Enlivant said that, prior to reopening, it did a full cleaning and remediation of Carter Place, continued staff training on COVID-19 best practices and procedures and conducted a voluntary Nebraska Medicine Infection Control Assessment and Promotion program review and walk through of Carter Place.

The infection control program and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services have cleared Carter Place to bring residents back, the Enlivant spokesperson said.

The facility will maintain ongoing COVID-19 precautions based on evolving guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, prohibit all nonessential visitors, screen all employees and essential visiting medical personnel, Enlivant said.

There will be no group activities, and all dining will occur in each resident's room.

"Our top priority remains the safety and health of our residents and employees," the spokesperson said. "We will continue to adjust our protocols based on evolving guidance from the CDC and in coordination with local & state health departments.

The Carter Place resident who died Sunday was former Dana College professor Darrell Dibben.

Carter Place is one of 230 Enlivant senior living communities across 26 states. Other locations in Nebraska include those in Seward, Nebraska City, Fremont and Columbus.

TOP

Washington County Pilot Tribune

Residents return to Carter Place

A Blair assisted living facility linked to 19 confirmed COVID-19 cases has reopened.

Residents have returned to Carter Place after an outbreak caused 13 residents and six staff members to become ill. Residents were moved to CHI Health Midlands in Papillion on March 28 and 29.

Seven residents returned Wednesday. More residents were expected to return Thursday and it will continue to welcome residents as they are deemed appropriate by the hospital, according to a spokesperson for Enlivant, the company that owns Carter Place.

Carter Place worked with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. They took several steps for the transition, including a full cleaning and remediation of Carter Place, continued training on COVID-19 best practices and procedures for staff, conducting a voluntary Infection Control Assessment and Promotion Program review and walkthrough of Carter Place.

Carter Place was cleared by ICAP and the Nebraska Department of Health to allow residents to return.

"Our top priority remains the safety and health of our residents and employees; we will continue to adjust our protocols based on evolving guidance from the CDC and in coordination with local & state health departments," the Enlivant spokesperson said.

TOP

KSNB

Two residents, three employees test positive for COVID-19 at Hastings nursing facilities

HASTINGS, Neb. (KSNB) - Good Samaritan Society – Hastings Village in Hastings, Nebraska, has confirmed that one resident and three employees in Perkins Pavilion skilled nursing facility, and one resident in the Goldbeck Towers apartment have tested positive for COVID-19.

We are frequently communicating with all residents, staff and families. We are working closely with state and local health officials to ensure our response plan meets the needs of this rapidly changing situation, and are following their guidance on testing employees who may have been exposed.

Our team is taking extra precautions to monitor the health of staff and residents. The health and safety of our residents, employees and the community we serve during this unprecedented pandemic remains our highest priority.

TOP

Grand Island Independent

Peak is a week and a half away, says Central District Health

By Jeff Bahr

Teresa Anderson of the Central District Health Department says the number of COVID-19 cases in the three-county area probably won't peak for another week and a half.

"Our expectation is that every day we will see a large number of new cases and every day we will see a number of deaths," Anderson said at Thursday's COVID-19 community update from City Hall.

"We believe that we haven't peaked yet, that we have maybe a week and a half before we'll actually peak," she said. "I would desperately love to be wrong about all of this. But if we take our lessons from what's been happening in other parts of the country, I'm going to say the writing is on the wall."

The Central District has a chance to reduce the number of cases by practicing social distancing, hand washing, staying home when you're sick and wearing a mask.

"So let's see if we can't prove me wrong, and I will be happy," Anderson said.

During the update, Anderson answered two questions that had been submitted by the public. Noting that hospitals seem to be keeping up with COVID-19, the questioner asked if there is a number that would overwhelm Grand Island's health care system.

"What we know is that our health care system currently is being taxed, or stressed. CHI St. Francis is doing a fantastic job of keeping up, with 17 ventilators. But because we keep getting very ill people admitted to the hospital, they're needing to transfer out people on ventilators," Anderson said.

At a press briefing Wednesday, Gov. Pete Ricketts said 17 people are on ventilators at CHI Health St. Francis. At least seven COVID-19 patients this week have been transferred to other hospitals, including ones in Omaha, the Omaha World-Herald reported. But CHI St. Francis is not at capacity and staff members are staying calm and collected, said Ricketts and Dr. Gary Anthone, Nebraska's chief medical officer.

Anderson said Thursday that "one of the problems is having enough equipment at the hospital for this surge in cases. Another key problem is that ventilators require special attention by specialized nurses, and there aren't enough.

"Again, CHI is doing a fantastic job of recruiting other CHI ventilator-trained nurses to come and provide assistance here," Anderson said. But people in this area need to stop the spread today "or we will be very quickly overwhelmed."

At the beginning of her talk, Anderson said her "smile today is a little bit strained, because we have increasingly

bad news."

The district now has more than 300 documented lab-tested COVID-19 cases.

The state Department of Health and Human Services reported that Howard County has its first confirmed COVID-19 case. The Howard

County resident is a man in his 60s with underlying health conditions who was known to be in direct contact with another person who was later identified to have COVID-19.

Thursday morning, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue stressed the importance of "our food supply continuing during the COVID-19 pandemic," said Mayor Roger Steele. "He said that food supply workers are essential and critical to our national security. And that is why food processing plants like JBS should remain in production, if possible.

"I speak to the management at JBS several times a week," Steele said.

During his most recent call, Steele told JBS General Manager Zack Ireland that the Salvation Army and Hope Harbor needed more beef. Ireland replied, without hesitation, that 200 pounds of beef would be donated to each, Steele said.

"He said that our community has been good to JBS and they are happy to give back. I personally thank JBS for providing food during a time when many people need help with basic necessities, such as food," he said.

Steele said Grand Island city employees are also critical workers as defined by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

"We all have fresh water, electricity, sanitary sewer service, solid waste disposal and well-maintained streets, in addition to life-saving police protection, fire protection and ambulance service, because our city employees have stayed on the job," Steele said. "My ability to speak to you is because of the city's IT Department continuing with its efforts to keep the work of City Hall connected. I am grateful to all city employees who deliver life-sustaining services to our community. To them, I say thank you."

Steele also reminded viewers of the requirements of the state's directed health measure. He mentioned the City Council decision Tuesday night, which gives police the power to issue fines of $100 to people who violate the order.

"Please make sure you comply voluntarily, so you do not get a citation for $100," Steele said.

On Wednesday, Central District Health announced that there have been 40 COVID-19 positive tests among staff members and residents in eight long-term care facilities and home health services in Hall County, and one in Hamilton County.

"We expect that number to continue to grow, not only in those long-term care facilities, but throughout our three counties," Anderson said Thursday.

As health officials review each COVID-19 case, they look for common factors. "Do they all live in one area of the three-country district? Are they all family members? What do they have in common? At this time, we can tell you they really have nothing in common," Anderson said. "That leads us to believe the virus truly is everywhere."

The other question from the public was, "What is being done to make sure the virus doesn't continue to spread through nursing homes or long-term care facilities?"

Anderson said each of the long-term care facilities has a relationship with DHHS to address issues of infection control. Each facility can use an information line to ask questions. "Each of the facilities has been provided with personal protective equipment for the staff to use when they're working with their residents," Anderson said. "One of our big problems in long-term care facilities is having the care workers work when they have no symptoms, but they can spread the virus."

The district has wonderful resources, and people are "working very efficiently and very effectively as a whole in all of our communities," Anderson said.

But the virus is difficult to control. "And this is a new virus. We're learning every day more about it. It's frustrating to us that we can't catch up to the virus," she said.

People should wear a mask when they go out in public and make sure it's well-fitted, she said. Except for the people living in our homes, we should all stay six feet apart, she said.

"The minute you start feeling symptoms of any kind, and there are a huge variety of symptoms associated with this virus, you need to remove yourself from any other individuals and isolate," she said. "We have no room for error. Everyone must do their part."

Anderson said "this is not a time to try to place blame or to find out who started this problem. We knew that we had the possibility of having a severe case of COVID-19. Every community knew that."

For whatever reason, she said, Grand Island and Hall County have become the leading area of the state "for infection and spread. So

we're going to continue the things we have been doing and we want you to continue as well."

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Grand Island's rate of COVID-19 cases is higher than Michigan's, close to Louisiana's

By Henry J. Cordes and Erin Duffy

The Grand Island area — by far Nebraska's biggest coronavirus hot spot — now has rates of illness comparable to some of the hardest-hit states in the country.

Not only does surrounding Hall County now have more cases than any county in Nebraska, its per capita case rate is almost 12 times that of Douglas County and more than 25 times that of Lancaster County, a World-Herald analysis found.

The Hall County rate is also now about equal to that of Louisiana, which ranks among the top states nationally in both cases and deaths. It's also higher than the per capita rate in Michigan, a state that has been in such a significant state-ordered lockdown because of the virus that it's spawned public protests.

And as eye-popping as such numbers are, Grand Island, Nebraska's third-largest metro area, is still likely weeks away from its peak of cases and deaths. The sixth death in the local three-county health district was reported Thursday.

"Our expectation is that every day we will see large numbers of new cases and every day we will see a number of deaths," Central District Health Department Director Teresa Anderson said Thursday. "If we take our lessons from what's been happening in other parts of the country, I'm going to say the writing is on the wall."

Despite such numbers, Gov. Pete Ricketts continued to say Thursday that the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic is working.

Ricketts said the state has provided Grand Island help with testing and with tracing the contacts of people who test positive. And he said he has been on the phone with Grand Island employers to make sure they are taking steps to reduce the spread of the virus.

"We are paying attention to Grand Island," he said during his daily coronavirus briefing.

He and Dr. Gary Anthone, Nebraska's chief medical officer, also noted that the health care system in Grand Island has been up to the task of handling the surge of patients.

As of noon Thursday, there were 13 patients in St. Francis hospital's 16-bed intensive care unit, including 11 on ventilators. There are more than a half-dozen additional ventilators available and still more within the CHI network.

Down the road at Mary Lanning Healthcare in Hastings, four of the 10 ICU beds are occupied by coronavirus patients.

"All in all, things seem to be fairly well under control in Grand Island," Anthone said of the health care landscape.

Hours later, the local health agency reported 61 new coronavirus cases in Hall County, bringing the total there to a state-leading 339. That's despite the fact that Hall has one-ninth the population of Douglas County.

The number of cases in Hall County is essentially doubling of every four days. That's more than twice the rate of Nebraska as a whole, which is currently doubling every nine days.

Overall, Nebraska as a state continues to rate well nationally in coronavirus cases and deaths. On Thursday, it ranked 42nd among the 50 states in cases per capita and 44th in deaths.

But the story is different on a county-by-county basis, as Hall, Kimball, Adams and Custer Counties have all emerged as hotbeds for COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus. Each of those counties has seen cases at three or more times the state average rate.

Hall County's rate, when measured per 10,000 people, has also reached a point that is comparable to the rates seen in states hit hardest by the pandemic.

As of Thursday morning, while Hall County's rate was still less than half the astronomical rate seen in New York, it was almost equal that of Louisiana, which has the nation's third-highest rate overall and No. 4 death rate. And it was much higher than Michigan's rate.

Dr. Ali Khan, dean of the University of Nebraska Medical Center's College of Public Health, said the figures in Hall County are "cause for caution."

The doctor declined to say whether additional measures are needed, saying he wasn't aware of all that are already in place in the county. The Ricketts administration has adopted a system of county-level directed health measures to control the virus. But Khan said people there clearly need to heed state and local officials' stay-at-home message.

"The bottom line is everyone should be staying at home, and we should clearly be helping this community," Khan said.

Taylor Gage, a spokesman for Ricketts, questioned comparisons with statewide rates elsewhere, saying it would be more appropriate to look at similar-sized counties or other hot spots across the country.

"Grand Island is a hot spot," he said. "The regional and state hospital systems are strong, and we are closely managing hospital-related cases in conjunction with local health officials."

In Grand Island, local health director Anderson said the high numbers are occurring "despite our best efforts."

She said the county is getting much-needed additional testing and will continue to advise residents to follow social distancing guidelines.

There have been a number of cases in Grand Island centered on large employers, including a meatpacking plant. And there are also a large number tied to nursing homes and long-term-care facilities, with 40 workers and residents at nine facilities having already tested positive.

But in the end, Anderson said, the disease has now spread so much that it can't really be linked to any one employer, facility, family or part of town.

"What do (cases) have in common?" she said. "At this time, we can tell you they really have nothing in common. That leads us to believe the virus is truly everywhere."

TOP

AP News

Grand Island area now has most coronavirus cases in Nebraska

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A central Nebraska county with a major meatpacking plant and a lot of nursing homes and manufacturing facilities now has more coronavirus cases than any other county in the state, according to new public health data.

Hall County confirmed 278 cases on Wednesday, surpassing the 263 known cases in Omaha's Douglas County, even though Douglas County has nearly nine times as many residents.

Hall County, which includes Grand Island, has seen a spike in cases at the JBS USA meatpacking plant, the McCain Foods frozen appetizer factory, nursing homes and a health clinic. Last week, the farm equipment manufacturer Case New Holland temporarily halted production to protect line workers who work in close proximity.

The actual number of Hall County cases is likely much higher than what's reported because the county has a "very limited" number of tests available, said Central District Health Department Director Teresa Anderson. The Nebraska National Guard helped test people last week, and Gov. Pete Ricketts said members will continue that work this weekend.

TOP

NET

"It Feels Like Every Day We Have A Lesser Chance Of Controlling It": COVID-19 Hits Hall County Hard

By Mike Tobias

Hall County has more confirmed COVID-19 cases than any other Nebraska county; 339 as of today, mostly from the city of Grand Island. NET producer Mike Tobias talks with Teresa Anderson, health director of the Central District Health Department that serves Hall, Hamilton and Merrick counties; her agency reports a total of 360 cases and six deaths from COVID-19 for all three counties.

Mike Tobias, NET News: First, give us a sense of what's it like right now for Grand Island's health care providers, clinics and hospitals?

Teresa Anderson, Central District Health Department Health Director: I think it's rather stressful, and hectic and challenging.

Tobias: Is the number of reported cases an accurate representation of the scope of COVID-19 in Grand Island?

Anderson: What I can tell you is, and these are last week's numbers that I'm going to talk about, so at the time that we had a thousand tests done, that was maybe the middle of last week, we have 78,000 people that we serve. So a thousand tests seems like a small number for that large population. With that small number of tests we were seeing a pretty high rate of positives as compared to our peers across the state.

Tobias: You've said you're hoping that "the number of much needed COVID-19 tests will increase."

Anderson: First I'll tell you where we are right now, because we have very limited testing. The hospital, of course, has testing available. Our major clinics, our larger clinics have limited to no tests available. So if we can't test to see where it is, and can't test to identify folks who are contagious, regardless of whether they have symptoms or not, there's not much we can do to have them quarantined. If you have a test that says "I'm positive," then you're more likely to say "I will stay home." But if you have a few sniffles, or a little bit of a cough, you're more likely to just keep going because that's our nature, at least in Nebraska. If we have more tests we can better identify the depth of the problem. This week we have the National Guard here again, thanks to the DHHS and the governor, so we're able to continue to test today, tomorrow and Saturday here in Grand Island. But we can't test just everybody because we only have 50 tests per day. So what we're hoping to do with those tests is to prioritize individuals who have symptoms, or who have been with a close contact who is identified as a positive COVID person. So we're trying to catch people at whatever stage we can, and again with the whole goal, and this is kind of Public Health 101, is to identify people who are contagious and have them quarantine.

Tobias: Any indication you'll get more tests?

Anderson: There is some indication of that. Just yesterday we requisitioned a number of tests for our clinics, so that the tests would come here and we will be able to redistribute them to the clinic based on need. Through the Governor's Office and through DHHS at the state level, they're able to procure some of those tests for us. Otherwise we would be without much of any tests.

Tobias: Why are you seeing so many cases in Hall County?

Anderson: When we started down this path and knew that the pandemic was coming, we were looking at how vulnerable we were in this three county area, but specifically in Hall County. We know that, when we're looking at the county road map rankings that tell us how healthy we are here, that we have some issues. We know that we have a lower median household income than the rest of the state, in a large part, and we also know that, generally, vulnerable populations will include our elderly, and we have a number of elderly citizens in our area. Also, when you're a culturally diverse community like we are, that that's an increased risk for illness based on that alone.

Tobias: Has the Hispanic-Latino population been hit disproportionally hard?

Anderson: The hard thing about that is that we have not kept data on race or ethnicity. While we were preparing for this, we didn't prepare well for everything. So, at least, at the local level, and I'm not sure what data we're submitting at the state level, I don't think that we're monitoring ethnicity and race, but I'm not certain on that. I can tell you that we have a number of interpreters that we're using in our contacts, so we are aware that we have some English as second language folks here and we're working to connect with them. When we do that, it takes a little bit longer because we need to use an interpreter to get the message there, but so far we've been able to provide those interpreters in-house.

Tobias: What's it going to take to slow your outbreak?

Anderson: So this is where we are right now. It feels like every day we have a lesser chance of controlling it. We've worked with our community and I've been really vocal about the need for every person to take this seriously. At this point, when we're getting 50 or 60 new cases every day, we're concerned that there may not be anything that we can do to slow the spread, if we cannot get the folks that live in this area to stay home and have social distancing and protect others and protect ourselves from catching the virus.

Tobias: Is a stay-at-home order needed?

Anderson: I don't know how much further that goes than what our current directed health measure is. But there has to be a way for us to get the message out. You have to stay home, and whether that's voluntarily or whether it's mandated at the state level, we need to get people to stay home

Tobias: Do you have all the resources and help you need?

Anderson: We have a lot of support. I will to tell you that, within our community itself, we have a really strong network of individuals, with the volunteers, the law enforcement, the first responders, excellent working relationships with our providers and with the hospital. What I will tell you too is, this is Public Health 101 as well, is that we say all public health is local. So we know that when we're hit with a disaster or a public health emergency that we have to take care of ourselves and that's what we've been doing. In addition to all of the folks within our community who reach out and support us, we have had some assistance through DHHS and also through the College of Public Health.

Tobias: Do you need more?

Anderson: Yeah, we do. We do. We're getting weary right now, and we're very committed and we're very passionate. Anybody in this building is just willing to work however many hours it takes to meet the needs of the community. But we need to be looking at how can we bring in some, I'm going to say, fresh horses to help carry the load for a while, because I do believe that we're going to see these numbers continue to increase over, at least the next 10 days and maybe for 14 days before we hit that plateau.

TOP

Grand Island Independent

CHI Health St. Francis sees uptick in COVID-19 patients

By Robert Pore

As the number of critical cases of people with the coronavirus increases, Ed Hannon, president of CHI Health St. Francis in Grand Island, said the hospital has developed plans to handle any sudden surges.

Hannon, during a press briefing Thursday afternoon, said the plan is modeled after other disaster plans the hospital has drawn up in case of an emergency. It looks at available hospital beds, ICU capacity, emergency room, staffing, equipment and other needs, and how many patients the hospital can handle if an overwhelming surge of infected people occurs.

“With this event, our plan is to try to take care of as many patients here at St. Francis as we possibly can,” he said. “But we don’t know what will be coming in the door next, so we want to make sure that we have the capacity to take care of them.”

Hannon said the surge plan’s next step is, when the hospital reaches capacity in the emergency room or ICU, staff will transfer their most stable patients to other CHI hospitals across the state.

Last Friday, he said, the hospital started to reach those thresholds of care with about 16 patients in its ICU. It began to transfer patients to other facilities.

Hannon said that in the past 36 hours, as of noon Thursday, the hospital had transferred five patients to other facilities. Several more have been transferred since last Friday.

“There is plenty of capacity across Nebraska, whether it be at CHI hospitals or not,” he said.

Hannon also said there are plans to take care of patients if all the state’s hospitals reach capacity. But he said he does not believe it will get to that level because Nebraska hospitals have plenty of available beds.

Grand Island has had the most confirmed COVID-19 cases in Nebraska.

When looking at how many patients the hospital can handle, Hannon said they look at the number of people coming the emergency room, how many patients are in the ICU, how many are on ventilators, how many beds are available, and staffing and supply levels.

Overall, St. Francis is at about 50% capacity.

“The area where we are feeling the most pressure in is our ICU,” Hannon said.

As of noon Thursday, 13 patients were in the hospital’s 16-bed ICU. Eleven are on ventilators.

“We still have a little bit more capacity to take on patients who are coming into the ER or who are transferred here from another facility,” Hannon said.

When they reach full capacity in their ICU, he said, they will begin transferring patients to other CHI hospitals in Nebraska, such as Good Samaritan in Kearney.

In moving a patient to another facility, Hannon said, staff first makes sure the patient is stable.

He said they are seeing a “pretty steady” volume in their emergency room, treating about 65 patients per day. But not all them have been infected by the virus.

Hannon said about half the patients have respiratory symptoms. The hospital has set up a 10-station respiratory fast-track area that can handle people who have breathing problems caused by the virus or other causes.

“We are seeing a lot of patients who are not COVID patients,” he said. “Those people go into the regular emergency room for treatment.”

In the fast-track area, the patients are evaluated on the severity of their respiratory problems. Those who are not in serious conditions are sent home and told to isolate themselves and provide the care they need.

“The majority of patients we are seeing may be COVID-positive, but they can go back home and be isolated at home and be treated. It is only the sickest of the sick that are admitted,” Hannon said. “So, it is hard for me to put a number on how many patients per day because it includes all of those.”

He said not many new patients are being admitted each day. Over the past few days, the handful of hospital admissons has remained consistent.

Hannon said as the number of patients with respiratory problems began to dramatically increase, staff asked other hospitals for additional ventilators and other equipment. They have received about a half dozen ventilators from other Nebraska CHI hospitals.

He also said St. Francis is bringing staff in from other CHI hospitals to help out as the number of COVID-19 patients increases.

Hannon said CHI hospitals are down one-third in their patient census as a result of the pandemic as they have stopped noncritical hospitalizations.

He said the hospital has about 17 ventilators available but has access to more if needed.

Health experts expect Nebraska will hit its peak in the number of COVID-19 patients by the first week of May, when the state will need about 60 ventilators and 67 ICU beds, Hannon said. CHI hospitals have more than enough ventilators and ICU beds to meet that expected capacity.

TOP

NTV

Seven Grand Island patients transferred to other hospitals

By Jessica Stevenson

LINCOLN, Neb. — As some local hospitals start to see more COVID-19 patients, others across the state are stepping up to help. During the Governor's Conference Doctor Gary Anthone announced this is already happening in Central Nebraska.

"St. Francis Hospital in Grand Island did transfer out five different patients, all specifically for medical reasons, at either University of Nebraska Medical Center or Mercy Medical Center or other hospitals that could provide care for those patients," said Anthone. "So there are five transferred yesterday, two the day before. And again the beauty of that system is its all within the Catholic Healthcare Initiative, the CHI system.”

Dr. Anthone said they have the cooperation of every hospital in the state to do inter-hospital transfers if necessary.

He said with Grand Island being considered a hot spot, he’s in communication with their hospital daily. While they are working hard, he said the hospitals believes things are under control in their facility.

“We have great bed capacity throughout the state," said Anthone. "Fifty percent of the beds now in the state are unoccupied and are ready to be occupied at any time, similar for ICU beds. So far we have not over whelmed the health care system whatsoever.

TOP

Lincoln Journal Star

CHI Health moving patients, ventilators to help Grand Island area

By Matt Olberding

CHI Health said Thursday that it has transferred patients out of Grand Island and also moved ventilators there from other hospitals to deal with the outbreak of COVID-19 in Hall County.

Cliff Robertson, CEO of the health system, said five patients had been transferred from CHI St. Francis in Grand Island to Omaha-area hospitals within the past 36 hours. He also said ventilators were sent to the hospital from CHI St. Elizabeth in Lincoln.

Robertson said the patients transferred were stable and they were moved to free up space in the intensive care unit, not because the Grand Island hospital couldn't handle their treatment.

In fact, he said both CHI St. Francis and CHI Good Samaritan in Kearney are similar in size to St. Elizabeth and all CHI Health employees get the same training whether they are in Omaha or a smaller community.

As of Thursday evening, Hall County had 339 confirmed cases of COVID-19, well more than Douglas County, which has about nine times the population.

Even with the transfers, as of Thursday morning, the Grand Island hospital still had 18 patients with positive COVID-19 diagnoses, 13 of those in its ICU, 11 of whom were on ventilators.

By contrast, St. Elizabeth in Lincoln had 15 COVID-19 patients in the hospital Thursday, none of whom were on ventilators. None of those patients were from Lincoln, however. There are 24 COVID-19 patients on ventilators at CHI Health hospitals in the metro Omaha area.

Overall, Robertson said there is plenty of capacity in the CHI Health system, with 350 beds available as of Thursday. That includes Grand Island.

No one in Hall County should "be afraid that the hospital is full," he said. "It is not."

The Grand Island hospital and all other CHI Health hospitals have adequate personal protective equipment and the hospital system has experienced no shortages, Robertson said.

When asked whether any staff in Grand Island had tested positive for COVID-19, he said CHI Health does not disclose that information, but he did say that there have been "an incredibly small number of exposures (among staff) and an incredibly small number of folks who have tested positive for the disease."

"So far we've been blessed," Robertson said.

That blessing has not extended to the company's financial situation, though, as he said CHI Health's revenues are down 30% since the pandemic started.

Despite that, he said the health system has not furloughed any staff who work in patient areas, including nonmedical workers, such as food and cleaning staff. Those workers are guaranteed pay as long as they agree to be redeployed where necessary. Those who don't agree to that stipulation can take paid time off, he said.

TOP

NET

Grand Island Healthcare Workers Manage An Uptick In Possible COVID Patients; Other Essential Workers Ask For More From The State

By Christina Stella and Bill Kelly

While Grand Island is bracing for a further increase in COVID-19 cases, local hospitals are still holding their own. But the pressure to manage an influx of patients is falling heavily on hospital staff without specialized ICU training. And they're not the only workers feeling the pressure lately.

Central Health District Director Teresa Anderson says Hall, Merrick and Hamilton counties now share over 300 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with most cases in Grand Island.

Officials expect that number to peak in just a week and a half: the outbreak could ultimately overwhelm the area's healthcare system, which Anderson said is already stressed.

"If we take our lessons from what's been happening in other parts of the country, I'm going to say the writing is on the wall," she warned.

But providers have avoided hitting capacity so far. Ed Hannon, president of St. Francis Hospital in Grand Island, says patient volume has been steady, but not unmanageable. The hospital is currently about 50 percent full.

"About 65 patients a day are coming into the ER. Of that, maybe half have respiratory type symptoms," he said on a press call Thursday.

Those respiratory cases are often sent to a recently opened fast track area, where doctors can triage them for hospitalization.

ICU beds have been harder to come by, with fewer than five available Thursday afternoon. But only a handful of patients are being admitted each day, as the vast majority can manage their symptoms at home.

Mary Lanning Hospital, which is just south of St. Francis in Hastings, has not activated its surge plan to cope with an influx of coronavirus patients. Mary Lanning continues to have capacity and can take more patients: as of Thursday, eight people were being treated for COVID-19. Four remain on ventilators in the intensive care unit.

Similar to St. Francis Hospital, Mary Lanning is not struggling with a shortage of equipment or bed capacity. Director of Nursing Ronda Ehly said keeping ICU beds properly staffed is the bigger issue.

"Not every nurse in my hospital can take care of an ICU patient on a ventilator," she said.

"So I have to make sure that not only are our patients safely taken care of with a nurse with the right skill set, but also, those nurses that are stretching beyond their skill set feel comfortable and supported in what they're doing."

Workers across all essential fields are finding their boundaries stretched as they keep the state functioning. And in some cases, employees feel the state has been too unwilling to regulate employers' pandemic policies.

After hearing from workers who must deal with the public, ten Nebraska state senators asked Governor Ricketts to take more action to protect them from the virus.

In a letter, the lawmayers asked Ricketts to formally consider people working in food production, grocery stores, and pharmacies "front line emergency service providers". They also requested private businesses get additional guidance on best ways to keep their employees safe.

Senator Kate Bolz of Lincoln was among those making the request.

"We've heard from several workers who are concerned about the things that they're being asked to do on the job," she said.

"And we think that gubernatorial guidance to private employers could help give those employees the foundation that they need to advocate to their employers about things like access to cleaning products, safe social distancing, and remote work whenever possible."

Bolz and the other nine senators said they also continue to hear from state employees concerned about government departments keeping office hours. The letter requests Ricketts allow every state employee to work from home if possible, and temporarily close offices to the public.

TOP

KETV

Governor Ricketts comments on Grand Island COVID-19 outbreak (video)

By Nick Amatangelo

CHI Health confirmed Thursday it has moved some COVID-19 patients from Grand Island to Omaha.

In his daily press conference Thursday, Gov. Pete Ricketts said the situation is under control there and doctors have enough personal protective equipment.

"There's a number of things we've been doing to take those steps in Grand Island to help educate people, to be able to help give them the tools they need to be able to do that social distancing and slow the spread in Grand Island," Ricketts said.

The state's public health director Dr. Gary Anthone says 18 patients are at CHI Health St. Francis Hospital.

Twelve of them are in the ICU, and eight of those patients are on ventilators.

The head of CHI's transfer center said they moved some patients from Saint Francis to facilities in Omaha. Director Kristen Blum said it ensures patients can get the appropriate type of care.

"Having the transfer center with access to our large network and system with that one call makes a big difference for patients," Blum said. "Especially with COVID-19, we're seeing the decline can be very rapid, so if you do have patients that you know might possibly have COVID-19 they're needing a high level or care really time is of the essence."

As of Thursday, CHI Health reports there are 58 COVID-19 positive patients in its hospitals in Nebraska and western Iowa.

TOP

Scottsbluff Star Herald

COVID-19 cases in Panhandle continue to remain low, while other areas of the state see surges

By Maunette Loeks

As cases in some area of the state have had a large growth in cases of the coronavirus case, the Panhandle has not, to date.

On Thursday, Scotts Bluff County officials updated that 33 positive cases have been confirmed in the Panhandle, with one more case from Scotts Bluff County reported. That person, a man in his 40s, who Scotts Bluff County Health Director Paulette Schnell reported did have connections to previously reported Scotts Bluff County cases. PPHD said all close contacts of the man had been contacted and were self-quarantining.

To date, Panhandle health officials have tested 725 people since March 2. Fourteen people have recovered, with persons in Box Butte County, Cheyenne County, Morrill County and Scotts Bluff County among those persons who have recovered. Officials did not provide any updates on persons who were hospitalized and had tested positive for the coronavirus. Last week, three people from the Panhandle were reported to have been hospitalized. One of those individuals, a Kimball man who had been hospitalized for about two weeks, has been released. The status of the two other individuals was not known.

In other areas of the state, the COVID-19 case is much more serious.

On Wednesday, Hall County, where Grand Island is located, reported 278 cases, exceeding cases reported in other areas of the state, including Douglas County. On that same day, Douglas County reported 263 cases. Douglas County reported its first case on March 6 and Hall County didn't report its first case until nearly three weeks later, on March 26.

Media in Hall County were reporting an additional 71 cases had been reported Thursday, but state numbers did not yet reflect those cases as of press time. In Thursday evening's update, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services had reported that the state had exceeded 1,000 cases, reporting 1,066 cases as of press time.

Those numbers, however, don't include the latest surge in cases in Hall County, with the local health department reporting 339 cases in its Thursday update. State totals still reflect Hall County at 268 cases. Twenty-four deaths have been associated with the coronavirus, according to the Nebraska DHHS.

At least two cases in the Panhandle have involved nursing homes. West Nebraska Veterans Home and the Sidney Health Care Center both released information regarding protocols at those facilities and Schnell said that officials are continuing with investigations at those facilities.

"We're doing very aggressive testing with them and they're being very cooperative."

In Thursday's briefing, people were also reminded about Gov. Pete Ricketts' "Stay Home. Stay Healthy. Stay Connected." initiative,

which is underway until the end of the month. The governor has encouraged people to stay at home. Other health measures, such as wearing a mask when in public, have also been recommended.

Engel said that officials continue to recommend that persons experiencing symptoms or possibly exposed to coronavirus self-quarantine. She noted that some of the recent cases have not involved a lot of reports about possible exposures because people are identified as close contacts and have been self-quarantining during the time that they are believed to be contagious, which is a two to 14-day window.

In other news, the Panhandle Health District officials noted that they had been interviewed by Time Magazine on the approach taken by the rural health district.

“It was a really great opportunity to really talk about where we’ve come and what we’d done over the last couple of months,” Director Kim Engel said, sayign it was heartwarming to talk about partners and the proactive approach taken in the Panhandle. The district also talked about the challenges and different perspectives, she said.

Businesses continue to be connected with resources through PPHD, which hosts a business call regularly on Thursdays. Questions during Thursday’s call involved hiring of new employees - who are recommended to quarantine if they have traveled from out of state - and other topics. Directed health measures remain in place that have changed restaurant and bar operations and also closed some businesses, such as salons and tattoo parlors.

For information on COVID-19 and resources, visit pphd.org.

TOP

Omaha World Herald

New UNMC modeling predicts 50 to 180 coronavirus deaths in Nebraska

By Nancy Gaarder

New modeling by the University of Nebraska Medical Center indicates that social distancing is making a difference with COVID-19 but that Nebraska can still expect between 50 and 180 deaths.

Dr. Ali Khan, dean of the UNMC College of Public Health, discussed the results during Thursday’s NET News town hall with Gov. Pete Ricketts.

Deaths in Nebraska stood at 25 on Thursday, based on state and local numbers. Nebraska hasn’t peaked yet, Khan said, but “what we are doing is making a difference.”

Khan and Ricketts dismissed the allure of seeking “herd immunity” by abandoning restrictions.

“Herd immunity means 60 to 80% of people get infected,” Khan said. “Herd immunity would have been devastation in terms of … cases and deaths.”

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Ricketts tells Nebraskans not to get their hopes up about relaxation of social distancing rules

By Paul Hammel

LINCOLN — Nebraskans hoping to see social distancing rules disappear after May 1 got a dose of caution from Gov. Pete Ricketts on Thursday.

Don’t count on it, the governor said.

“I don’t want to raise anyone’s expectations,” he said. “We are not going to lift all of these social distancing guidelines all at once.

“In fact, we will probably be doing some social distancing for the foreseeable future, until we have a vaccine.”

The state’s plan, he said, appears to be working to “flatten” and slow the spread of the coronavirus so the state’s health care systems are not overwhelmed to the point that patients can’t get an intensive care bed or a ventilator and health care workers don’t have

proper protective gear.

The governor spoke just before joining a conference call with President Donald Trump and other state governors on Thursday afternoon.

Ricketts emphasized that Nebraska would not alter its plan to continue its “protective health measures” until the end of April, regardless of what the president announces.

But, toward the end of the month, the governor said he would use a combination of federal and local guidance, as well as data on use of the state’s health care resources, to decide what guidelines might be lifted on a “step by step” basis.

Earlier this month, Ricketts mentioned the possibility that the rule against social gatherings of more than 10 people could be amended to 25 people or more.

At his daily press briefing, the governor again defended his approach to the COVID-19 outbreak, which has been criticized by some for avoiding the “shelter-in-place” orders issued in more hard-hit states.

Ricketts pointed to voluntary polls taken by users of Google in Nebraska indicating that people are spending 29% less time at work and 11% more time at home.

“We’re going to continue to stick to the plan we have now, because that plan is working,” he said.

The guidelines Trump released Thursday call for places with declining infections and strong testing to begin a three-phased gradual reopening of businesses and schools, with each phase lasting at least 14 days, meant to ensure that the virus outbreak doesn’t accelerate again.

“I appreciate President Trump’s guidelines for reopening pieces of the economy that have been closed temporarily,” Ricketts said in a statement Friday afternoon. “It is critical that we get people back to work safely and continue to slow the spread of the virus as the country opens up.”

Trump also announced on Thursday a bipartisan task force to work on reviving the economy called the Opening Up America Again Congressional Group. Nebraska Sens. Deb Fischer and Ben Sasse are on the panel, as are Iowa Sens. Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst.

“I know he wants to open up the country. Everybody does,” Ricketts said. But, he added, it must be done in a way that doesn’t allow the virus to return.

Thursday marked the end of the first week of the governor’s call for Nebraskans to stay home for 21 days in hopes of curbing the state’s coronavirus outbreak.

In other coronavirus news:

- Fourteen state senators signed a letter Thursday calling on the governor to allow every state employee who is able to work from home to do so and to declare that grocery store employees and workers in food-processing plants be included among the “front-line” emergency workers who get priority for COVID-19 testing.

Ricketts, however, said the current priority system is appropriate. It prioritizes first responders, health care workers and those who work in nursing homes because they are most likely to get the virus, he said.

- The state has received $625 million from the federal CARES Act but is awaiting guidance from the feds on how the money can be spent. The money represents half of what the state is expecting to receive, Ricketts said.
- Matt Blomstedt, the state education commissioner, said he’s getting a lot of calls about how schools can conduct graduation ceremonies.

He suggested postponing commencement until midsummer, after the virus peak has been reached in the state.

He said that Red Cloud was able to hold a commencement for its nine graduates, with attendees sitting in vehicles but that not all school districts in the state will be able to do that.

- Ricketts said the state is providing personal protective equipment to the state’s Native American tribes but has advised them that direct allocations of funds will come from the CARES Act, which allocated $11 billion to the tribes.

A representative of the Omaha Tribe maintained that the state had “withdrawn” its offer of financial aid. The governor said that was a misunderstanding.

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Ricketts rejects Lathrop's call to prevent Nebraska Crossing from reopening

By Paul Hammel

LINCOLN — A state senator from Omaha on Thursday predicted a spike in coronavirus cases unless Gov. Pete Ricketts takes action to block the Nebraska Crossing shopping mall from reopening.

“I think we’ve seen what happens when we are not staying put,” State Sen. Steve Lathrop said. “You’re seeing hot spots in Grand Island and Sioux Falls.”

“If people start going back to retail like pre-virus days, we’re going to have more people get sick, more people spreading things, more people in the hospital and more people subject to this life-threatening condition,” he said.

The governor, during his daily coronavirus briefing, rejected Lathrop’s call for a stay-at-home order to block the reopening of the outlet mall, which has planned a “soft” opening in a week and a grand opening in two weeks.

“We haven’t asked anyone to close,” Ricketts said. “We are asking Nebraskans to exercise their personal responsibility, their civic duty, to do the right thing.”

That, he said, includes following the “six rules” he unveiled last week to keep Nebraskans safe. One of the rules is to avoid unnecessary shopping trips and, if you must shop, to leave family and friends at home and go alone. Ricketts unveiled the rules as he urged Nebraskans to redouble their social distancing efforts through the final weeks of April.

“We’ve got to continue to stay focused on this, but we don’t need to say that person or this person needs to close their business,” the governor said.

Nebraska Crossing has said that it would be the first shopping mall in North America to reopen and that it could serve as a “case study” and help establish best practices for reopening stores. But the head of the Nebraska Hospital Association has condemned the reopening as an “irresponsible” move that would nullify the progress the state has made in slowing the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

Lathrop, in a letter to the governor on Wednesday, said the outlet mall has “nonessential businesses” that shouldn’t be allowed to reopen until effective treatments for the virus are found and more progress is made toward developing a vaccine.

“Social distancing is not a cure,” the senator said. He fears that if restrictions on public gatherings are relaxed, cases of coronavirus will begin spiking because the vast majority of Nebraskans have not been exposed to it.

TOP

Lincoln Journal Star

Ricketts won't ask Nebraska Crossing outlet mall not to reopen

By Don Walton

Gov. Pete Ricketts said Thursday all signs suggest that his plan to control the spread of the coronavirus in the state is working and that he has not asked Nebraska Crossing Outlets to delay its scheduled reopening at a time when presence of the virus in the state is expected to peak.

Rod Yates, owner of the shopping mall along Interstate 80 between Omaha and Lincoln, said he is planning to reopen some outlets next week.

Questioned at his daily coronavirus news briefing whether he has asked Yates to delay that reopening, Ricketts said: "I have not spoken with Nebraska Crossing. We have not asked anyone to close.

"We are asking Nebraskans to exercise their personal responsibility," the governor said, and perform their "civic duty."

"Nebraskans do the right thing," Ricketts said.

On Wednesday, Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha sent the governor a letter urging him to issue a stay-at-home order to prevent the shopping mall from reopening "until health professionals believe we are adequately prepared to safely allow movement within businesses across the state."

Laura Redoutey, president of the Nebraska Hospital Association, has said reopening the shopping center at this time could "nullify our efforts" to put a clamp on the virus in Nebraska.

Reopening now "poses a serious risk to the health of all Nebraskans," she wrote in a letter to the Omaha World-Herald.

Rather than issue a shelter-in-place order to remain at home, Ricketts has urged Nebraskans to work at home, limit shopping to once a week, closed schools, confined restaurants and bars to off-sale service, banned gatherings of more than 10 people and asked individuals to maintain 6 feet of physical distance from one another.

"We haven't closed businesses. We have asked people to stay at home," the governor said. "Our plan is working.

"We don't plan on changing the plan; we will stick with that plan."

Looking ahead beyond April, the governor said, there "probably will be some distancing for the foreseeable future until there is a vaccine."

Responding later in the day to President Donald Trump's announcement of guidelines that he believes states should follow in beginning to open up the economy, Ricketts said he appreciates the president's guidance.

"It is critical that we get people back to work safely and continue to slow the spread of the virus as the country opens up," the governor said.

Speaking at the governor's news briefing, Dr. Gary Anthone, the state's chief medical officer, said "things appear to be fairly well under control in Grand Island," despite the number of confirmed cases in Hall County surpassing 330 on Thursday.

The number of coronavirus patients in intensive care at CHI St. Francis in Grand Island has dropped as has the number on ventilators. In Hastings, he said, four patients are on ventilators.

"Those are the hot spots right now," he said.

The Nebraska National Guard has returned to Grand Island to institute new testing for the virus through Saturday, Ricketts said.

Grand Island and Hall County have the highest number of coronavirus cases in the state, even more than populous Omaha and Douglas County. Many cases in the central Nebraska county were generated at the JBS Beef Plant, although there also have been clusters of cases at long-term-care centers.

"We are paying attention to Grand Island," Ricketts said.

"I've reached out to major employers in Grand Island to see what they are doing" to provide worker protection and social distancing, he said.

"Grand Island is a manufacturing town, (and) that's not an easy place to work from home."

Ricketts said the state is working with food processing plants in an effort to keep them open.

Lincoln Children's Zoo President and CEO John Chapo joined the briefing to announce that the zoo will offer virtual, interactive tours of the zoo for elementary school children during this time when schools are closed.

"Teachers can bring up to 100 children to interact with the zookeepers," he said. The zoo plans to provide tours at least 12 to 15 times a week.

State Education Commissioner Matthew Blomstedt suggested that schools could consider waiting to honor this year's senior class graduates with ceremonies in July if the coronavirus threat has been tamed by then.

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Grace: Nebraska should send clear message, like a stay-at-home order, to defeat coronavirus

By Erin Grace

The posted speed limit on Interstate 80 near the exit to the Nebraska Crossing mall in Sarpy County is 75 mph.

Drivers, for their sakes and the common good, are supposed to go no faster than that and no slower than 40.

Those speed limits are as clear as the black numbers on the white roadside sign, as clear as the digital message flashing "Nebraska Strong" in the mostly empty parking lot of a massive Gretna shopping mall on this sunny still-pandemic April day.

The lot is empty now because of Gov. Pete Ricketts' stay-at-home-through-April request. But by next week, expect to see more cars outside Nebraska Crossing. The mall's owner, Rod Yates, has decided to speed past the state's voluntary policy, and Ricketts won't stop him.

Some critics see Yates as a lead-footed driver and contend that the governor is too willing to yield. Others support Yates' goal of making Nebraska Crossing the first mall in North America to reopen. A day after the news drew national attention, neither Yates nor Ricketts appeared to change lanes.

Yates might appear to be flooring it. (After all, Nebraska schools are looking at potential fall-at-home contingencies). But he said he's still driving safely. Some of the global brands that fill the 80-plus shopping bays at Nebraska Crossing had noted Nebraska's relatively lower coronavirus curve and asked him to be the test case for reopening retail.

Yates, who lives in Omaha, was happy to "do my part as a landlord to help a trillion-dollar industry get back on its feet."

The governor said Wednesday that it was Nebraskans' civic duty to voluntarily comply with his health directives versus "the heavy hand of government coming down on you."

A formal stay-at-home order has been something Ricketts has avoided like — how to put it? — the plague.

Instead, Ricketts has relied on an appeal to common sense and Nebraska Nice in offering a softer — and not ineffective — approach. A World-Herald analysis found the state ranks low in both known coronavirus cases and deaths, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the immunologist on the national stage, said the state is doing a good job.

Ricketts has issued directives summed up by a catchphrase: stay home, stay healthy, stay connected. He has warned that April would be bad. He has said to hunker down. He has told Nebraskans to shop just once a week, alone, and only for essential services.

But when Yates, the mall owner, blew past him in the left lane on Tuesday, the governor let him go rather than pulling him over for speeding. Ricketts wouldn't even address whether the mall qualified as an essential service.

A visit Wednesday to the mall with big names like Nike and North Face showed why Yates would be eager to hit the gas. An empty shopping mall is an especially eerie place with its locked doors and piped-in pop music.

Who wants to be stranded on that shoulder?

Walking through, I yearned for pre-pandemic normal. I walked by closed Vineyard Vines wishing I could take my 14-year-old and a gaggle of her friends there so they could spend (too much) on T-shirts. I'd love to see my toddler nephews climbing on the playground. Plus my daily uniform of old yoga pants and a million Christmases-ago sweater could use a change-up. Even as I wear masks in public and avoid the grocery store and bathe in hand sanitizer, I'm not sure I wouldn't have crossed J. Crew's shiny threshold if it had been open on Wednesday.

But the speed limits aren't just to protect our personal safety by curbing our own risk-taking. They are based on scientific study and intended for the good of the entire community everybody.

A speeding driver doesn't just risk his own neck. He risks the lives of others around him.

There were a few people at Nebraska Crossing on Wednesday— a handful of clients of dog trainer Kristin Sandstede's.

Everyone appeared to be properly distanced as they walked their pooches on empty sidewalks in front of locked doors that beckoned shoppers to go online or stay safe.

Sandstede said the coronavirus rules were confusing and besides, what is “essential” anyway?

Does it make sense for a Costco to be open with its crowded lines when an open-air shopping mall remains closed? Don’t people get to decide for themselves?

“If you don’t like it being open,” she said of Nebraska Crossing, “then don’t come.”

Client Lori May was conflicted. She understands the desire to reopen, get life back to normal and restore some business. Her husband’s dental practice in Fremont is shuttered right now. But opening a mall seemed, she said, “premature.”

Then again, she had gone to Hy-Vee just the day before to get her husband some Mickey Mouse trinkets, including a balloon. They were supposed to be in Disneyland for his birthday and, of course, that’s out.

May said she wore a mask but felt guilty getting something as trivial as a balloon, knowing that the clerk who waited on her risks getting sick by having to work during the pandemic.

Without posting a speed limit, Ricketts has relied on people to drive safely. But if Nebraska Crossing reopens too soon, what’s to stop other businesses from bypassing the governor’s request and following Yates in the fast lane?

Yates is hoping to be a national model. He talks about “best practices” and says he plans a careful soft opening. At first, just a quarter of the stores will be open as store managers figure out how to safely distance employees and customers and make decisions on when to send a potentially sick person home.

People have to get back to work, Yates said, and why not show how to do that correctly?

Stuck in the car with Yates are the mall employees who will have to put their own health on the line when the stores reopen. Yates is offering thermometers, plastic shields and masks. That might feel insufficient, the way a seat belt does for a passenger when the driver starts to speed.

The coronavirus is vexingly invisible, which makes the need for clarity in the response even greater.

How will Yates keep crowds thin enough? How can he make the test case a success story and not put the state on the map for being, as Nebraska State Sen. Adam Morfeld dubbed it, “Covid Crossing”?

Yates said he’s encouraging shoppers to follow the grocery rules: Come alone. Don’t linger. He also acknowledged that this is an experiment.

Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert has shown what clear rules look like. Like Ricketts, Stothert first relied on good will when she asked Omahans to quit going to city parks in groups. But picnickers, soccer teams and others ignored the “directive,” so Stothert closed the parks, except for those passing through, including golfers.

We all yearn to get the family roadster back on the open highway.

But right now, the time calls for taking it slow — and that requires unambiguous traffic signs.

Here’s one I saw on I-80, heading back home after my trip to Nebraska Crossing. The overhead sign pointed drivers to a state website on quarantine directives.

Wouldn’t it have been clearer to just flash two words? Stay home.

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Health officials seek to ease concerns raised by Antelope County's purchase of a temporary morgue

By Paul Hammel

LINCOLN — Health officials in north-central Nebraska are trying to tamp down concerns raised by Antelope County's purchase of a temporary morgue.

On Tuesday, the Antelope County Board purchased a refrigerated trailer for the purpose of holding bodies in anticipation of a surge of deaths due to COVID-19.

But an official with the North-Central District Health Department, based in O'Neill, said Thursday that the projected death toll used by the county to make the purchase was an estimate based on people doing nothing to mitigate the spread of the virus, such as the social distancing measures enacted by Gov. Pete Ricketts.

The projection — that up to 300 people could die in the nine counties served by that health district — was for "planning purposes only," and is most likely excessive because residents are adhering to advisories to avoid large groups and stay at home, said Carol Doolittle, a prevention coordinator for the North-Central District Health Department.

The district sent out a press release late Wednesday in an attempt to reassure local residents, who expressed concern and fear in social media posts, and to clarify that the projections were a worst-case scenario.

"I think what other communities have done is line up someone they could contact in the event they would need (a temporary morgue)," she said. "This is all just for planning. It's not 'go out and buy a trailer.' "

As of Thursday morning, there were five confirmed COVID-19 cases in the nine counties, Antelope, Boyd, Brown, Cherry, Holt, Keya Paha, Knox, Pierce and Rock Counties.

Those case numbers speak for themselves, Doolittle said, in terms of local compliance with the governor's recommended "Six Rules" for staying safe during the pandemic.

Officials in Antelope County didn't respond to phone messages left Thursday. But a story published by the Antelope County News quoted both Sheriff Bob Moore and County Board Chairman Charles Henery as saying that the purchase of the $10,000 refrigerated trailer as a temporary morgue was made so the area would be prepared for the worst. The trailer could be resold if it proved unnecessary, board members said.

"Pray to God we don't need it," said Henery, according to the newspaper.

A spokeswoman with the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency said Thursday that she was not aware of any directive from that office for local emergency districts to purchase trucks or trailers for use as temporary morgues.

TOP

KETV

Two UNO on-campus apartment complexes available for quarantined individuals

By Sean Everson

A parking lot is empty and so are apartments on the University of Nebraska-Omaha's Dodge Campus. Thursday, a sign warns that it's a quarantine zone.

"We always have to have the apartments ready for whoever the next occupant is which is typically our next group of students, but could be different," said Assistant Director of Residence Life Chloe Smith.

UNO agreed with the state and Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services to make the campus's University and Maverick Village apartments available to "temporarily lodge individuals under quarantine and/or isolation." A statement from the university stated, "This agreement is in the very early stages. At this time, UNO has not received any notification that individuals will be moving in for quarantine and/or isolation purposes."

Smith said the apartments are being prepped just like they normally would.

"When folks move out we go through the spaces, make sure that things weren't left behind. We would go through and make sure everything was clean which is just our typical processes for when folks move," Smith said.

There are 230 units between the two apartment complexes. Each apartment has four bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and two bathrooms and are furnished with beds, desks, couches and nightstands.

“We’ll have linens available for folks, trashcans will be available for folks that will be in the apartments when they would arrive here,” Smith said.

TOP

10/11 Now

Nebraska Air, Army National Guard test for COVID-19 across state (video)

OMAHA, Neb. (WOWT) -- A select group of Nebraska Air and Army National Guard are traveling the state to complete critical COVID-19 testing.

On Friday, the task force will have teams conducting COVID-19 testing in Lexington, Grand Island, Bloomfield, and O’Neill.

They are testing hundreds of people, including healthcare workers and law enforcement.

“We are coming in contact with people that are very, very high chance of being positive tests,” said Nebraska National Guard Lt. Col. Jennifer Hasslen.

The group is making sure they are prepared and staying protected during the entire testing process — not just to protect themselves, but also the general public.

“We still have to go to the grocery store to get our food. We still have to go get takeout food, so we’ve made a rule now that you have to wear your mask if you’ve basically left your hotel room,” said Lt. Col. Hasslen.

The team is staying in hotel rooms instead of at home to keep their families away from the high-risk work.

“This task force is all volunteers coming out. Being put on state active duty orders to really help with this testing and being a good representation of how the guard assists in time of need,” said Nebraska National Guard 2nd Lt. Natasha Hilsgen.

As of Wednesday, the Nebraska Air and Army National Guard have tested nearly 1,500 people for COVID-19.

TOP

NTV

Gov. Ricketts: Federal abortion rulings won't impact Nebraska

LINCOLN, Neb. — A federal appeals court panel ruled that medication abortions, in which women take pills to terminate a pregnancy, can be provided in Texas during the coronavirus pandemic.

The ruling Monday from a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals was among several developments in Republican-led states where governors have sought to prohibit almost all abortions by classifying them as elective procedures that should be put off during the virus outbreak.

Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued an executive order last month that bars non-essential medical procedures so that health resources can go to treating coronavirus patients. Texas’ Republican attorney general has said that providing abortions other than for an immediate medical emergency would violate the order.

But a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said that medication abortions can go forward. In a concurrence, Judge James L. Dennis wrote that Texas' move to ban medication abortions “is a strong indication that the enforcement is pretextual and does not bear a ‘real or substantial relation’ to the public health crisis we are experiencing.”

Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts said Tuesday that he didn't think federal rulings would have an impact on Nebraska's Directed Health Measures.

"Our DHM, again, was applied in a uniform way to people with regard to all those elective surgeries regardless of what you're doing. If you're doing an elective surgery for replacing a knew versus doing an abortion," said Ricketts.

The governor said those surgeries can only be done in critical situations.

Arkansas Attorney General Leslie Rutledge on Wednesday asked the appeals court to lift a federal judge's order that allowed the state's only surgical abortion clinic to continue performing the procedure.

The state last week ordered Little Rock Family Planning Services to not perform surgical abortions unless they were needed to protect the life and health of the mother.

The state argued that the clinic violated a ban on elective surgeries during the coronavirus pandemic. Other states have used similar orders to restrict abortions.

Monday, a 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals panel upheld a lower-court order that overturned an Oklahoma ban.

The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals also declined to hear an appeal by Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost seeking to reverse a judge's temporary restraining order allowing abortion facilities in the state to continue performing surgical abortions.

In Louisiana, an abortion provider in Shreveport filed a federal lawsuit to block any state attempts to ban abortions during the pandemic. June Medical Group, which operates the Hope clinic, said abortions are still currently being done

The Shreveport clinic is at the center of a separate case currently at the Supreme Court over whether doctors who perform abortions must have admitting privileges at a nearby hospital.

And in Tennessee, abortion providers filed an emergency motion in federal court seeking an order that would allow them to continue providing surgical abortions.

Over the weekend, Texas abortion clinics asked the Supreme Court to step in to allow medication abortions.

Such an abortion involves taking one pill at a clinic, then taking a second pill 24 to 48 hours later, typically at home. Clinics have argued that medication abortions do not require personal protective equipment like masks, gloves and gowns that might be needed for coronavirus patients.

Texas permits medication abortions during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy.

"Now it's time for Gov. Abbott to end his exploitation of this pandemic to ban all abortion access," said Nancy Northup, president and CEO of the Center for Reproductive Rights. "None of it is medically justified, all of it is unconstitutional, and women are being thrown into a state of fear and uncertainty."

Attorney General Ken Paxton's office didn't immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday on the court's ruling.

Texas Alliance for Life issued a written statement calling on abortion providers to follow the original order to free up doctors and supplies.

"The most recent order fails to recognize the danger abortion providers pose to the public by refusing to comply with Governor Abbott's executive order in the same way other providers of non-immediately medically necessary surgeries and procedures have done," said Texas Alliance for Life Executive Director Joe Pojman.

TOP

Lincoln Journal Star

14 senators ask Ricketts to broaden definition of essential workers

By JoAnne Young

Fourteen Nebraska state senators are calling on Gov. Pete Ricketts to shore up protections for state employees and other front-line workers.

In a letter sent Thursday, the senators said they have heard concerns from constituents working on the front lines of the COVID-19 response about their own health, safety, and stability.

They urged Ricketts to include grocery store, pharmacy and food production workers in the definition of front-line emergency service providers. Those emergency workers could then qualify under the coronavirus relief bill and any future federal acts for certain economic assistance and benefits, such as access to emergency child care, said Lincoln Sen. Kate Bolz.

The letter also asked the governor to:

* Allow every state employee possible to work from home. Currently about 30% are working remotely.

* Allow services provided to the public, such as Department of Motor Vehicles, Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Labor services to be provided over the phone or delayed until the crisis passes, and closing offices to face-to-face interaction wherever possible to protect state employees.

* Issue a proclamation or guidance to businesses to promote proper social distancing, work-from-home policies, adopt additional health and screening practices, expand personnel and leave provisions that encourage self-quarantine to contain spread.

Ricketts spoke to the letter in his daily briefing, saying he hasn't made a formal distinction in his recommendations of which essential workers have to go to work versus everybody else.

Emergency workers can be designated for priority in virus testing and lodging programs, he said, but programs may be extended to others down the road.

"I think we prioritized appropriately," he said.

The 14 senators are Sens. Dan Quick, Sue Crawford, Adam Morfeld, Rick Kolowski, Kate Bolz, Anna Wishart, Carol Blood, Robert Hilkemann, Machaela Cavanaugh, Wendy DeBoer, Megan Hunt, Sara Howard, John McCollister and Matt Hansen.

TOP

NTV

State Senators calling on Gov. Ricketts to strengthen protections for workers

LINCOLN, Neb. - A bipartisan group of Nebraska State Senators are calling on Governor Pete Ricketts to strengthen protection for state and public workers. The call was instigated by an uptick in concerns raised by constituents working on the front lines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The letter calls on Governor Ricketts to:

- Immediately include grocery store workers, pharmacy workers, and food production workers in the state's definition of front-line emergency service providers.
- Allow every state employee possible to work from home.
- Allow services provided to the public, such as DMV, DHHS, and Labor services to be provided over the phone or delayed until the crisis passes and closing local offices for face-to-face interaction wherever possible to protect state employees.
- Issue a proclamation or guidance to businesses to promote proper social distancing, work from home policies, adopting additional health and screening practices, expanding personnel and leave practices that encourage self-quarantine to contain spread.

At the end of the letter the senators thanked the Governor for his and his team's hard work during the pandemic, asking them to continue to help other workers in Nebraska "stay home, stay healthy, and stay connected."

TOP

KNEB

Nebraska Joint Information Center Update for Thursday April 16, 2020

COVID-19 Case Updates

Nebraska As of April 16 at noon, the current case numbers for Nebraska are:

952 positive tests — 11,3423 negative tests — 21 deaths

Nebraska numbers include negative results from NPHL and commercial labs. Both state and local health departments are testing and publicly reporting their cases. In the event of a discrepancy between DHHS cases and cases reported by local public health officials, data

reported by the local health department should be considered the most up-to-date.

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) data dashboard provides daily updates to the state's COVID-19 case totals and is online at http://dhhs.ne.gov/coronavirus

U.S. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website reports today:

605,390 cases — 24,582 deaths

These statistics include both confirmed and presumptive positive cases of COVID-19. https://www.cdc.gov/covid19.

Globally World Health Organization Situation Report as of April 15 at 3 a.m.,

1,914,916 cases — 123,010 deaths

Johns Hopkins University of Medicine COVID-19 Dashboard as of 1:34 p.m. April 15

2,034,020 cases — 133,261 deaths

State of Nebraska Updates

Gov. Pete Ricketts' Office https://governor.nebraska.gov/

At his 1 p.m. news conference today, Gov. Ricketts asked Nebraska Commissioner of Education, Matthew Blomstedt, to talk about some educational issues that are currently being addressed.

One concern Blomstedt said schools are addressing is graduation ceremonies for high school seniors. Blomstedt said school cannot hold ceremonies now, but may plan on a physical graduation ceremony scheduled for later in the summer.

Blomstedt said educators are also working on plans for how to open schools in the fall. He said they hope that by the middle of July they will have enough data for more concrete planning.

John Chapo of the Lincoln Zoo announced they are now offering free virtual interactive tours to elementary school teachers across Nebraska. Teachers can virtually bring up to 100 students to interact with the zookeeper to learn about animals and ask questions. Their goal right now is 75 tours

REMINDER Businesses have been asked to respond to a Business Response Survey to share what is happening to them with the COVID-19 pandemic at https://bit.ly/NE-Biz-Survey-2020. (For more information on the survey, see the Department of Economic Development portion of this news update below.)

REMINDER

Nebraska is on Day 7 of

21 Days to Stay Home and Stay Healthy — Six Rules to Keep Nebraska Healthy

Stay home. No non-essential errands and no social gatherings. Respect the 10-person limit.
Socially distance your work. Work from home or use the six-foot rule as much as possible in the workplace.
Shop alone and only shop once a week. Do not take family with you.
Help kids follow social distancing. Play at home. No group sports and no playgrounds.
Help seniors stay at home by shopping for them. Do not visit long-term care facilities.
Exercise daily at home or with an appropriately socially-distanced activity.

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) COVID-19 Information | DHHS News Releases

Health care workers, EMS, law enforcement and corrections officers who are concerned about exposing loved ones to COVID-19 unintentionally because of the daily requirements of their job can request a room by calling (833) 220-0018. The phone line is staffed from 7 a.m. – 7 p.m. seven days a week. Messages left on the after-hours voicemail will be returned the following day. Turnaround time for a site placement will not be immediate, but will be within 24 hours This program is for first responders, not the general public. Lancaster County workers must coordinate directly with their employer.

DHHS Links and Information COVID-19 Information | DHHS News Releases

Nebraska COVID-19 Information Line: (402) 552-6645. Hours: 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. CST – every day.
State agencies are sharing information using the #NECOVID19 Hashtag
DHHS has produced COVID-19 announcements available in English and En Español. Directed Health Measures translated in Spanish and Vietnamese are now available for Douglas, Cass, Sarpy and Lancaster counties.
http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx#SectionLink1
Review the Health Alert Network (HAN) for recent information and guidelines for health care providers.

Nebraska Emergency Management Agency https://nema.nebraska.gov/news

REMINDER NEMA has several Twitter lists you can follow by visiting https://twitter.com/NEMAtweets/lists. Consider Subscribing to the Nebraska State Government List or to the Nebraska County and Regional Emergency Managers List.

REMINDER There is no essential staffing list maintained by the State of Nebraska for people who have jobs to perform. Individuals leaving their homes in order to perform an activity or function for their jobs DO NOT need to carry or present any letter, identification card or other paper proving that they are allowed to leave their home.

Attorney General's Office

NEW Attorney General's Office: Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson has alerted creditors, debt collectors, and financial institutions that Nebraska law may exempt CARES Act stimulus checks from attachment, garnishment or execution for certain low-income consumers. You may read more here.

Department of Administrative Services

A number of state agencies and private organizations have received inquiries from Nebraska manufacturers that have the capabilities to provide needed medical equipment for hospitals and medical providers. The Nebraska Department of Administrative Services (DAS) has partnered with the Nebraska Manufacturing Extension Partnership (NMEP) to help organize the manufacturers with these capabilities and connect them with the medical community.

For manufacturers please visit https://go.unl.edu/criticalmanufacturing to register your company and list the products your company is able to produce in short deadlines. For people in the medical community that want to access these companies and order needed supplies, please contact: Doug Carlson, Chief Procurement Officer for the State of Nebraska, doug.carlson@nebraska.gov, 402-471-0972

Department of Agriculture (NDA) nda.nebraska.gov

NEW Farmers Markets: The Nebraska Department of Agriculture has created guidance for farmers markets to help keep vendors and customers healthy and to slow the spread of COVID-19. All farmers market operators should first consult with their local health department to ensure that the market is able to meet all local health department guidelines. Farmers market guidance and additional information for agriculture producers can be found on NDA's website at: www.nda.nebraska.gov/COVID-19.

NEW Face Coverings Needed for Grocery Store Employees: NDA also wants to thank the dedicated employees of grocery stores across the state that are helping to move food to consumers. We are relaying a message from the Nebraska Grocery Industry Association that says many grocery stores are having trouble finding face coverings for their employees and are currently seeking them for added protection to their staff so they can stay healthy and keep serving customers. If you or someone you know are sewing face coverings, we encourage you to call your local grocery store and see if they are in need.

Department of Banking and Finance

https://ndbf.nebraska.gov/about/covid-19-consumer-and-industry-guidance

The Nebraska Department of Banking and Finance extended the expiration dates of two orders previously issued to assist registrants under the Securities Act of Nebraska, from April 30 to May 31, 2020.

https://ndbf.nebraska.gov/sites/ndbf.nebraska.gov/files/about/2632_001.pdf

The department has posted a link for citizens to check the status of their stimulus payment.

https://ndbf.nebraska.gov/sites/ndbf.nebraska.gov/files/about/Check%20status%20of%20your%20Economic%20Impact%20Payment.pdf

Department of Corrections corrections.nebraska.gov

NDCS has COVID-19 related information on its webpage at https://corrections.nebraska.gov/ndcs-coronavirus-health-update.

Department of Economic Development https://opportunity.nebraska.gov/nded-covid19/

NEW Business owners or nonprofit leaders are being asked to fill out a survey to report on how COVID-19 has impacted their organizations. The response will help the State of Nebraska, the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce, the University of Nebraska and other partners understand the impact coronavirus has had on revenue and workforce—and find the best ways to support our business and nonprofit community during this crisis. Make your voice heard at https://bit.ly/NE-Biz-Survey-2020.

The Nebraska Department of Economic Development, the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce, the University of Nebraska and other business-related organizations are reaching out to Nebraska businesses to better understand the initial and potential future impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) on the revenue and workforce of business organizations.

The goal is to find the best ways to support the Nebraska business community. The Nebraska Business Development Center (NBDC) at the University of Nebraska is working with Dr. Josie Schafer at UNO's Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR)—and in collaboration with Dr. Eric Thompson at UNL, Dr. Dave Dearmont at the Nebraska Department of Economic Development and Pete Thompson at the Omaha Chamber—to develop a survey for Nebraska businesses. CPAR will capture the survey results and publish the statewide report. The survey will be in both English and Spanish language versions.

Applies to non-profit leaders as well as business leaders
We want to understand challenges as we develop support strategies
Survey will help as we work to restore growth/plan for the future
The survey launched today at 2 pm and will run through Friday, April 24 at 5 p.m. (10 days total).

Department of Environment and Energy http://dee.ne.gov

NEW NDEE has issued guidance for indoor and outdoor pools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The department recommends pools, spas and spray parks carefully evaluate state and local Directed Health Measures, and close or delay opening until they are lifted.

Current Centers for Disease Control guidance states the novel Coronavirus is not spread in pool water if proper pool chemistry is maintained; however, there is a concern for common areas and people being in close contact.

For more information, please refer to the memo on our COVID-19 page.

Department of Insurance

The Department of Insurance has completed a comprehensive telehealth survey of the primary health insurers selling major medical in Nebraska. The questions and responses from Aetna, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Bright Health, Medica, and United Health Care can be found at https://doi.nebraska.gov/sites/doi.nebraska.gov/files/doc/TELEHEALTH%20QUESTIONS%20AND%20RESPONSES.pdf.

Department of Labor NEworks.nebraska.gov and dol.nebraska.gov

UPDATE The Nebraska Department of Labor (NDOL) reports that during the three weeks ending April 4 there were 66,741 initial unemployment claims filed. That compares with 41,727 claims filed during the entire 2019 calendar year.

Spreadsheets showing claims data are available here and are updated every Thursday. Initial claims are filed by individuals to request a determination of eligibility for unemployment insurance benefits. NDOL processes initial unemployment insurance claims and, if an individual meets eligibility criteria, benefits are paid for each week of continued unemployment. Unemployment Insurance data includes information for initial and continued claimants. Data is updated weekly on Thursdays and is available online at: I am .https://neworks.nebraska.gov/gsipub/index.asp?docid=710

Any worker in a non-paid status due to COVID-19 may file a claim for unemployment insurance benefits. Unemployment claims in Nebraska are filed online at NEworks.nebraska.gov. The NEworks mobile app is available to download for free. After filing a new initial claim, applicants must certify their eligibility every week that they continue to be unemployed by logging into their NEworks account. These weekly certifications must be completed even while the new claim is still being processed. Claim and payment status can also be viewed by logging into the NEworks account.

The federal CARES Act created a temporary program that offers benefits to individuals not eligible for regular unemployment insurance

benefits including the self-employed, independent contractors, gig workers, and others (Pandemic Unemployment Assistance or PUA). The act also increases the amount an individual on regular unemployment or PUA will receive by $600 for every week an individual is unemployed. All individuals who qualify will receive $600 in additional benefits for each eligible week of unemployment, including prior weeks. Workers who have been affected by the pandemic should file a claim for unemployment. NDOL will automatically review every claim that comes in for eligibility under the CARES Act.

Department of Motor Vehicles DMV news releases

Department of Natural Resources To support National Flood Insurance Program policyholders amid the COVID-19 pandemic, FEMA is extending its 30-day grace period for policy renewals up to 120 days. This is effective for National Flood Insurance Program policies with an expiration date between February 13 – June 15, 2020.

For more information, visit the FEMA website https://nfipservices.floodsmart.gov/

FEMA also has some guidance on flood insurance claims during this time. It allows for the claims to be adjusted remotely without an adjustor visiting the property.

Our agency also continues to ensure that critical water related information remains available (see https://dnr.nebraska.gov/. It is being updated continuously, including real-time streamgaging information.

Department of Revenue

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Nebraska Department of Revenue provides guidance, direction, or pertinent public information such items may be found here. The most current information will be posted to the department's website under "Featured Information". Taxpayer Assistance is also available online and by phone, and contact information may be found here.

Lottery https://nelottery.com/homeapp/article/4220/display

Nebraska Lottery players with prizes up to $19,999 are encouraged to claim by mail. Instructions for claiming prizes by mail can be found at https://nelottery.com/homeapp/article/4220/display Regional Lottery Claim Centers in Grand Island, Norfolk, North Platte, and Scottsbluff are closed to the public, but Nebraska Lottery headquarters in Lincoln and the Omaha Claim Center are open. Call 402-471-6100 to confirm office hours before claiming a prize in person at these locations.

Department of Veterans' Affairs

NEW A teammate at the Western Nebraska Veterans' Home (WNVH) in Scottsbluff has tested positive for COVID-19. Further testing is being conducted in coordination with Panhandle Public Health District (PPHD).

Teammates at all four veterans' homes have been completing screenings and having temperatures taken to check for COVID-19 symptoms upon entry of the facilities. When the WNVH teammate indicated possible exposure to COVID-19 they were directed to self-isolate at home and PPHD was contacted to complete testing. WNVH is continuing to work with PPHD to screen and test any teammates and members who may have previously come into contact with the teammate who tested positive.

Protecting the health and safety of the members of the four state veterans' homes, as well as the teammates who serve them is a top priority for NDVA. The NDVA COVID-19 task force has been coordinating efforts in all four veterans' homes to limit the chances of contact with the coronavirus. Starting March 11, entry to the facilities was limited to NDVA teammates and medical professionals, who are required to complete a screening upon entry. A "virtual visitor" system has been put in place to keep families connected while access for in-person visits is limited. All non-essential travel outside the facility was postponed and communal dining has been discontinued.

NEW Testing of members and teammates at the Central Nebraska Veterans' Home (CNVH) has revealed two more cases of COVID-19. Both of the individuals who tested positive were teammates working in the facility. They are self-isolating at home, and the facility is continuing to follow strict infection control guidelines.

A member at CNVH first tested positive for COVID-19 on April 10. The facility worked with Two Rivers Public Health Department to complete testing of all teammates and members who may have come into contact with that member. No additional members tested positive. These are the only positive teammate cases to date.

"Knowing how easily this virus spreads, the results of this testing shows the effectiveness of the precautions we've put in place at the facility," said Facility Administrator Alex Willford. "I want to thank our entire team for their dedication and the work they're doing to care for and protect our members, and wish a speedy recovery to our teammates healing at home. We're in this together and we will

get through it together."

Game and Parks Commission http://outdoornebraska.gov/healthinfo/

http://magazine.outdoornebraska.gov/2020/04/a-fun-challenge-for-you-camp-at-home-nebraska/

In a proactive effort to stop the spread of COVID-19, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is prohibiting overnight camping at state parks, state recreation areas and wildlife management areas through Friday, May 8 and state park area lodging and cabins are closed through May 8 as well.

What's a camping enthusiast supposed to do? How about … getting away in your own backyard?

"Nebraska Game and Parks Commission knows that camping is one of many people's favorite activities, and we want to encourage you to create memories with your family during this time by doing some of your favorite things at home," said Parks Division Administrator Jim Swenson.

Until conditions allow for overnight camping at its state park and recreation areas, the commission is encouraging people to pack up and pitch a tent at home as part of a new campaign: Camp At Home, Nebraska.

Those who participate can share photos of their "at-home" adventures by using the hashtag #CampAtHomeNE in their social post, or by sending photos via direct message to the Game and Parks Facebook page. Those who send a direct message with a photo, their name and address will be automatically entered into a drawing for prizes, including miniature camp lanterns and a grand prize two-night camping stay at one of our state parks after the threat of COVID-19 has diminished.

"We hope by camping at home, people can continue to foster their love of the outdoors while having a bit of fun during these stressful times," Swenson said.

To help inspire, Game and Parks shares its top 10 tips for creating #CampAtHomeNE memories:

Get everyone in your household involved in the planning and work together to design your ideal camp-at-home experience.
Pitch your tent or make your own out of materials around the house wherever you have space — even if that means your living room.
Gather around the campfire, built in an appropriate and safe location, such as a fire pit, fire ring, or even a clay flowerpot or metal bucket. Don't have a safe place? Skip it!
Focus on food. Roast hotdogs or tinfoil dinners. Whip out your cast-iron skillet or Dutch oven and make one-pot campfire meals. Or put all your energy into s'mores. The microwave, oven, barbecue grill and camp stove are all acceptable alternatives to cooking outdoors.
Invent "camping" games using everyday household items.
Go on a backyard scavenger hunt tailored to your interests. Moonlit scavenger hunts can add to the fun.
Make your backyard a movie theater. Project a movie onto a white sheet or side of the house, or just huddle behind a tablet or other electronic device for a quaint viewing experience.
Practice outdoors skills. Make a slingshot out of stick and rubber band, build a birdhouse, or practice casting.
Fix gear. Replace fishing line on reels, patch holes in tents, or season cast-iron cookware.
Light up the yard. Play hide-and-go seek while wearing glow sticks, or make your own camp lantern using an empty peanut butter jar and a battery operated candle.
"The important part is making the adventure your own, Swenson said. "We've given you some ideas to get started and hope you share your adventures with us to inspire others."

For more ideas, visit OutdoorNebraska.org/CampAtHomeNE.

For a list of all Game and Parks cancellations, postponements and closures, go to: OutdoorNebraska.org/healthinfo. For more detailed information about how coronavirus cancellations may affect customers, check the Frequently Asked Questions page at OutdoorNebraska.gov/covid19faqs or use the Contact Us form at OutdoorNebraska.gov/contact. Past news release are available online: http://magazine.outdoornebraska.gov/category/news/

Military Department

NEW A total of 228 Nebraska National Guard Soldiers and Airmen are supporting COVID-19 response efforts in Nebraska.

Three mobile testing teams continue to provide support to local health districts. As of Wednesday, they have collected 1,468 test samples in 8 counties across the state in support of local health districts.

Teams are prepared to provide staff support for alternate housing (dorms) on UNO, UNL, UNK campuses.

Distribution of PPE from Lincoln to health districts is ongoing.

The Nebraska National Guard continues to provide logistical and planning support to our local, state and federal partners.

National Guard personnel supporting COVID-19 response are receiving health checks themselves at least twice daily.

The Nebraska National Guard will be updating this album with photos throughout the COVID-19 response

Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH)

NCDHH has the following VLOGs online relating to COVID-19:

COVID-19: Educational Resources & Communication Access NCDHH Executive Director John Wyvill discusses the importance of ensuring you and your child are prepared and receiving education information during transition to remote-learning.

COVID-19: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Organizations Stress Importance of Communication Access NCDHH Behavioral Health Coordinator Carly Weyers provides information on how to best keep informed with full communication access on announcements related to COVID-19.

COVID-19: NCDHH Offices and Social Distancing Information regarding preventative measures to keep you and the NCDHH team healthy featuring Behavioral Health Coordinator, Carly Weyers.

Nebraska State Fire Marshal's Office

NEW The Nebraska State Fire Marshal has developed an electronic burn permit that can be used by fire chiefs across the state beginning today. It allows fire departments to review, approve and issue burn permits without having to meet in-person with those who are requesting them, thus promoting social distancing and reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission to the firefighting community.

To obtain a PDF copy of the electronic burn permit, or to find out more, a fire chief can contact Assistant State Fire Marshal Doug Hohbein by email at doug.hohbein@nebraska.gov and request one. Requirements for the proper issuance and use of the permit are included on page 2 of the permit.

The issuance and use of electronic burn permits will terminate 30 days after the COVID-19 declared State of Emergency has been withdrawn."

Nebraska State Patrol

NEW The Nebraska State Patrol (NSP) has partnered with two Lincoln businesses to develop a product that could save thousands of pieces of personal protective equipment. The product will allow NSP troopers and investigators to use gas masks with reusable filters rather than N95 masks at crime scenes.

Every NSP trooper and investigator has a gas mask, but filters for the current gas masks are in short supply during the COVID-19 pandemic. In searching for a solution, NSP personnel located several hundred filters, which were made to fit a different design of gas mask, which was previously used by NSP. However, those filters did not fit the current gas masks.

Working with Lincoln businesses Kawasaki Motors and IntoMetal, an adapter has been produced that allows current gas masks to work with the different model of filter. Kawasaki was able to perfect a design for the adapter and IntoMetal was able to quickly produce the adapter using a 3D printer. The adapters are already being distributed for use throughout the state.

"This is tremendous work by our team and personnel from Kawasaki and IntoMetal," said Colonel Bolduc. "This project has the potential to save thousands of pieces of PPE, such as N95 masks and face shields. By reducing our need for those valuable resources, hopefully the limited supplies can be diverted to medical workers and others working on the front lines against COVID-19."

This project is intended for the masks to be used at crime scenes or during investigations. Troopers will not be wearing gas masks during regular patrols or on traffic stops.

NSP is also eager to share this design with any other law enforcement entities throughout the country that could potentially benefit from combining the MSA Millennium gas mask with the MSA 3-lug bayonet filter cartridges designed for the MSA Advantage 1000 mask. Any agency that would like to receive design specifications can find the design at the NSP website.

Nebraska State Treasurer's Office

Due to the COVID-19 health crisis, the Unclaimed Property Division offices are closed to the public. Treasurer's Office staff are available by phone at 402-471-8497 or 877-572-9688 and will continue to process claims mailed into the Lincoln office or filed online.

Office of the Chief Information Officer Website

Updated Malicious cyber threat actors are capitalizing on the global attention surrounding COVID-19 to facilitate scams, distribute malware, and send phishing emails. We ask all Nebraskans to practice the following safe security habits online:

Exercise caution in handling any email with a COVID-19-related subject line, attachment or hyperlink, and be wary of social media pleas, texts or calls related to COVID-19. Tips for Avoiding Social Engineering and Phishing Attacks: https://www.us-cert.gov/ncas/tips/ST04-014
Avoid clicking on links in unsolicited emails and be wary of email attachments. Tips for Using Caution with Email Attachments: https://www.us-cert.gov/ncas/tips/ST04-010
Use trusted sources—such as legitimate, government websites—for up-to-date, fact-based information about COVID-19.
Look at the email address, not just the sender. A genuine email from a legitimate organization would have the organization's name in the domain name, indicating that it is coming from someone at the organization.
Do not reveal personal or financial information in an email, and do not respond to email solicitations for this information.
Verify a charity's authenticity before making donations.
Look for obvious grammatical errors and be wary of any emails that have implied consequences for failure to comply with demands.

Communications platforms guidance for individuals and organizations

Due to COVID-19, an increasing number of individuals and organizations are turning to communications platforms—such as Webex, Zoom and Microsoft Teams— for online meetings. In turn, malicious cyber actors are hijacking online meetings that are not secured with passwords or that use unpatched software.

Tips for defending against online meeting hijacking

Do not make meetings public. Instead, require a meeting password or use the waiting room feature and control the admittance of guests.
Do not share a link to a meeting on an unrestricted publicly available social media post. Provide the link directly to specific people.
Manage screen sharing options. Change screen sharing to "Host Only."
Ensure users are using the updated version of remote access/meeting applications.
Ensure telework policies address requirements for physical and information security.
For more information visit: https://www.us-cert.gov/ncas/alerts/aa20-099a

Public Service Commission

UPDATED April 12-18 is National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week. The Nebraska Public Service Commission encourages everyone to take time to honor our 911 dispatchers and telecommunicators for everyone thing they do for our citizens and first responders.

The PSC State 911 Department is also sharing COVID-19 guidance for Nebraska Public Service Answering Points (PSAPs) on our State 911 Department webpage @ http://tiny.cc/PSAPCOVID19Guidance

Secretary of State's Office

NEW Reminder to voters that May 1 is the last day to send in your mail-in ballot request form.

To date, County Clerks/Election Commissioners have received 271,449 ballot requests.

In 2016, a Presidential Election year, statewide votes totaled 313,000

NEW Poll workers are needed for the Nebraska 2020 Primary Election, May 12. Contact your County Clerk/Election Commissioner to become a poll worker https://bit.ly/3eoOl9j

State Partner Updates

American Red Cross

In coordination with the FDA, the Red Cross, along with blood industry partners, is seeking people who are fully recovered from the new coronavirus to sign up to donate plasma to help current COVID-19 patients. People who have fully recovered from COVID-19 have antibodies in their plasma that can attack the virus. This convalescent plasma is being evaluated as treatment for patients with serious or immediately life-threatening COVID-19 infections, or those judged by a healthcare provider to be at high risk of progression to severe or life-threatening disease. To learn more, visit RedCrossBlood.org/plasma4covid.

Medical Reserve Corps and Community Emergency Response Teams

The Medical Reserve Corps is working with DHHS to help meet staff shortages in long-care facilities. The Eastern Nebraska MRC has been active in providing behavioral health services for Three Rivers, Douglas County and Sarpy County Health Departments; and is helping Three Rivers with contact tracing.

Hall County Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) has been called upon to help with Strategic National Stockpile Hubs. This is a role that they have been training and exercising for the past few years. The Hall County Teams have also been solicited for help assisting the county election commissioner, who is losing all regular poll workers due to concerns over COVID-19.

Central Nebraska MRC has also been involved with the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) from the Strategic National Stockpile throughout the Central Nebraska Area.

All MRCs and CERT teams remain at the ready throughout the state and are working with their local partners to better respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nebraska.

Natural Resources Districts (NRDs):

On Arbor Day weekend (April 24-26), Nebraskans will participate in the statewide Nebraska Tree-A-Thon to celebrate #ArborDayAtHome by planting and celebrating trees. Communities are collaborating with a coalition including Beyond School Bells and afterschool providers, the Arbor Day Foundation, Natural Resources Districts, Audubon Nebraska, Nebraska Forest Service, Nebraska Department of Education and the University of Nebraska. Whether it is planting trees, going on a nature walk, making birdhouses or posting a tree selfie, Nebraska's youth and their families are encouraged to join the Tree-A-Thon this year to collectively share in the importance of trees. Please join the Tree-A-Thon by posting a picture of your family planting and/or celebrating trees with hashtags: #netreeathon, #treeselfie and #arbordayathome.

NRD employees doing field work (checking well levels, testing water and soil, tree planting, etc.) are considered essential workers. Landowners and the public should allow them to do their work uninterrupted.

Want to visit an NRD recreation area? Check for closures and access limitations by visiting: www.nrdnet.org/recreation.

University of Nebraska Medical Center | Nebraska Medicine

UNMC experts answer questions about COVID-19 https://www.unmc.edu/coronavirus/media.html

Ali Khan, M.D., M.P.H., dean of the University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Public Health, will discuss coronavirus (COVID-19) on April 21 at 10 a.m. as part of the Omaha Science Café series.

To continue social distancing this Science Café will be offered via Facebook Live which can be viewed at: https://www.facebook.com/ScienceCafeNE/

Dr. Khan's professional career has focused on health security, global health and emerging infectious diseases. He completed a 23-year career as a senior director at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which he joined as a disease detective, and where he led and responded to numerous high-profile domestic and international public health emergencies. Dr. Khan also is a former assistant surgeon general with the U.S. Public Health Service.

UNMC has COVID-19 Resources on its website. Nebraska Medicine UNMC have led the world in treatment, training and quarantine methods for highly infectious diseases since caring for patients during the 2014 Ebola outbreak.

Federal Partner Updates

Center for Disease Control and Prevention The CDC provides guidance on daily life and coping during

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) COVID-19 Federal Rural Resource Guide

The guide organizes funding opportunities identified in the CARES Act and other federal resources that can support rural America. For more information on the immediate actions USDA is taking to respond to COVID-19, visit usda.gov/coronavirus.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)/Center for Disease Control (CDC)

Find answers about COVID-19 here: https://faq.coronavirus.gov/

National Institutes of Health https://www.nih.gov/health-information/coronavirus

NIH is a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is the nation's medical research agency and makes discoveries that improve health and save lives.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

COVID-19 Pandemic Eligible Emergency Protective Measures Fact Sheet

For general information related to the federal response efforts, visit www.fema.gov

For rumor control, go to www.fema.gov/Coronavirus-Rumor-Control

For information on How to Help

Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) https://www.bop.gov/coronavirus/index.jsp

Internal Revenue Service (IRS)

The IRS has established a special section focused on steps to help taxpayers, businesses and others affected by the coronavirus. Find more info here: https://www.irs.gov/coronavirus-tax-relief-and-economic-impact-payments

U.S. Department of Treasury has information for those who need financial relief at Your Money and Coronavirus: Resources for Financial Relief. In addition, check out the department's information on Assistance for Small Businesses.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Get answers to VA related questions about the coronavirus: https://www.va.gov/coronavirus-veteran-frequently-asked-questions/

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has information on Food Safety and COVID_19

The FDA is working with U.S. Government partners to address the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak. Find more information here: https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/counterterrorism-and-emerging-threats/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19

U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA)

SBA launched a $349 billion emergency loan program last week entitled Paycheck Protection Program, as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES). Visit www.SBA.gov/Coronavirus for information about protecting your business, employees and customers. SBA issued guidance clarifying that all faith-based organizations impacted by COVID-19 are eligible to participate in the Paycheck Protection Program and the Economic Injury Disaster Loan program, without restrictions based on their religious identity or activities, to the extent, they meet the eligibility criteria.

Other Resources

Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University has a COVID-19 map with case information from around the world. It can be found at https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html as part of the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center website. The site also includes News & Information, a Data Center, Covid-19 Basics and Videos & Live Events.

Mayo Clinic has information about COVID-19 and a COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool on its website.

World Health Organization (WHO) information on COVID-19 Pandemic information includes Public Advice a Q&A, Situation Reports and Myth Busters and more.

TOP

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