From: Kopsa, Ryan
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Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
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Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Feb 2021	5.27	-22.00	08:25
Corn	Oct 2021	4.16	-35.00	08:25
Milo	Feb 2021	6.34	85.00	08:25
Milo	Oct 2021	4.76	25.00	08:25
Soybeans	Feb 2021	13.07	-67.00	08:26
Soybeans	Oct 2021	10.89	-75.00	08:25
Wheat	Feb 2021	5.62	-62.00	08:22
Wheat	Jul 2021	5.74	-55.00	08:22

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10/11: Nebraska pharmacies to receive COVID vaccines directly from federal government
KLKN: Vaccine supply not keeping pace with demand in Lincoln's neighboring counties
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Scottsbluff SH: Stinner addresses constituents on 107th legislature

Hearing fatigue, new prisons and the two-year budget cycle were some of the topics state Sen. John Stinner of Gering addressed during his bi-monthly constituents call, Rolls and Issues.
Stinner, who is in Lincoln currently, addressed the gathered constituents on Thursday. The group included people from Gering Public Schools, the Panhandle Public Health Department, the City of

Scottsbluff, the Scottsbluff/Gering United Chamber of Commerce, Western Nebraska Community College, members of the media and other private businesses. It's a twice-monthly event hosted by the Scottsbluff/Gering Chamber of Commerce.

"Usually, I try to start and give you an idea of what actually is happening on the floor and with the legislature. COVID obviously has changed everything on how we do business," Stinner said at the onset of the call.

The 107th legislature started its first session in early January. Since then, hundreds of bills have been introduced ranging in scope and topic.

"The (committee) chairmen sent letters out to the members of the legislature saying, 'Hey, let's really kind of concentrate on priorities, limit your legislation as best you can.' That didn't work," Stinner said.

So far, senators have introduced 684 bills and 33 resolutions, according to the Nebraska Legislature website. Stinner has dropped 13 bills. Three of which, he discussed on the call.

Stinner said what he is focusing in part on is childcare.

He said he wants to send over $2.5 million during the next two years to the Sixpence program.

"It's oversubscribed, a lot of people want to be in it, mostly schools and like that. So hopefully that'll give them an opportunity to expand the early childhood program and provide resources to do a good job there," he said.

Stinner is also asking the legislature to increase funding to the Nebraska Cultural Preservation Endowment Fund. That helps fund places such as museums and theaters including the West Nebraska Arts Center, Legacy of the Plains and the Midwest Theater.

"This is all about economic development," he said. "I think, (in terms of) quality of life, it is absolutely critical that we have these types of programs in our communities to attract and retain people."

Stinner also discussed a bill that would fund backlogged maintenance in the University of Nebraska system. He said the university has about $700 million in deferred maintenance, or infrastructure and asset maintenance delayed and backlogged due to budget limitations or lack of funding.

He outlined the progress level for passing a biannual (two-years) budget. Stinner was reelected by the legislature as chair of the Appropriations Committee in January, giving the Panhandle senator a top spot in the budget-making process for a fifth year.

"I've got a pretty experienced committee with many of the members who have been through two years to four years of a budgetary cycle," he said.

Stinner said the governor's proposed budget has some initiatives around broadband and education that were likely to pass the legislature without issue. Gov. Pete Ricketts also requested the legislature provide $115 million in funding for a new state prison. Stinner said that, because they won't receive important information about the project until April, other considerations like sentencing reform and community custody beds would be examined in the meantime.

"Maybe there are alternatives to move people through the prison situation, making sure that the population is safe, but still making some sense of it," Stinner said. "As long as you have that inflow coming in at that level you're going to be building prisons for a long, long time."

He also discussed Ricketts' proposed request for $50 million for Space Command. Nebraska had been courting the new agency as Space Command searched for a headquarters. Ultimately, the Trump administration chose to put the facility in Alabama.

"Now, with the Biden administration, we're hoping that maybe we will get a relook," Stinner said.

The Legislature's budget would also fully fund the state aid to public schools, according to Stinner.

The budget is on an accelerated timeline this year. Stinner said it will probably get to the floor by March. He said the idea was to be finished with hearings by March 4 and move onto floor debate for the full senate.

The next call is scheduled for Feb. 18.

By Justin Garcia

StateScoop: Nebraska plans to complete next-generation 911 by end of 2022

The State of Nebraska plans to complete its deployment of next-generation 911 by the end of next year, a public safety official there told StateScoop on Thursday.

Following a competitive procurement process, Nebraska last month awarded telecommunications contractor Lumen an $8 million contract to provide the emergency service network, software and call-routing services for the state's next-generation 911 upgrade.

Like many states, Nebraska is upgrading its decades-old analog communications networks to a digital platform that promises to offer new capabilities, like easy sharing of photos and video between callers and public safety answering points, or PSAPs, and improve network up-time through statewide redundancy and data-sharing functionality. In a press release announcing the partnership with Lumen last week, Gov. Pete Ricketts said it will equip the state's first responders "with more information that will help keep them, and all Nebraskans, safer."

The contract, which includes an initial term of five years with five one-year options, would represent a major advancement in the state's emergency communications if completed by the state's deadline of the end of 2022.

With 93 counties and a vastly rural landscape, statewide next-generation 911 is a big project with many considerations, said Tim Schram, a commissioner on the Nebraska Public Service Commission.

"It's important that the system be built with the necessary capacity and redundancy to ensure that 911 calls are answered without interruption and that the GIS data can be as accurate as possible for the geospatial call routing, and that the system be secure from cyber vulnerabilities," Schram told StateScoop. "We need to also ensure that adequate funding exists to support the statewide system."

In Nebraska, 911 services and upgrades are primarily funded by property taxes, Schram said, along with phone surcharges. To prepare for the current stage of the upgrade, which involves connecting PSAPs to the state's digital emergency services network, Schram said the commission asked the PSAPs to "regionalize," easing the process of hosting remote regions with statewide redundancy.

He said the commission also informed the state legislature in recent years that next-generation 911 upgrades would be costly, so the state allowed counties to save up their 911 funding so they would have enough funds available when the time comes to buy new equipment.

Amid cybersecurity concerns surrounding next-generation 911, Schram said network redundancy is a crucial feature.

"That's why you want redundancy and resiliency on a statewide basis," he said. "If you have one 911 center that's inoperable that you have neighboring PSAPs to handle those calls."

By Colin Wood

ProPublica: After Hundreds of Meatpacking Workers Died From COVID-19, Congress Wants Answers

A key congressional panel launched an investigation this week into the wave of COVID-19 infections that killed hundreds of workers at meatpacking plants nationwide last year and highlighted longstanding hazards in the industry.

Since the start of the pandemic, the meat industry has struggled to contain the virus in its facilities, and plants in Iowa, South Dakota and Kansas have endured some of the biggest workplace outbreaks in the country.

The meat companies' employees, many of them immigrants and refugees, slice pig bellies or cut up

chicken carcasses in close quarters. Many of them don't speak English and aren't granted paid sick leave. To date, more than 50,000 meatpacking workers have been infected and at least 250 have died, according to a ProPublica tally.

The congressional investigation, opened by the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, will examine the role of JBS, Smithfield Foods and Tyson Foods, three of the nation's largest meat companies, which, the subcommittee said, had "refused to take basic precautions to protect their workers" and had "shown a callous disregard for workers' health."

The subcommittee is chaired by Rep. James E. Clyburn of South Carolina, the No. 3 Democrat in the House.

In response to the subcommittee's announcement, officials for JBS and Tyson said that the companies had spent hundreds of millions of dollars to implement coronavirus protections and to temporarily increase pay and benefits, and they looked forward to discussing their pandemic safety efforts with the panel. Smithfield said in a statement that it had also taken "extraordinary measures" to protect employees from the virus, spending more than $700 million on workplace modifications, testing and equipment.

The House subcommittee noted that reports from a variety of news organizations had illuminated problems with how the meatpacking companies handled the pandemic, and with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's enforcement efforts. The subcommittee cited ProPublica's reporting on how meat companies blindsided local public health departments, and on Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts' efforts to intervene when local health officials tried to temporarily shutter a JBS plant amid an outbreak. ProPublica has also documented how meat companies ignored years of warnings from the federal government about how a pandemic could tear through a food processing facility, and chronicled the role that meatpacking plants like a Tyson pork facility in Waterloo, Iowa, have played in spreading the virus to the surrounding community.

The subcommittee's inquiry will also scrutinize the federal government's shortcomings in protecting meatpacking workers. "Public reports indicate that under the Trump Administration, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) failed to adequately carry out its responsibility for enforcing worker safety laws at meatpacking plants across the country, resulting in preventable infections and deaths," according to the subcommittee's letter to OSHA.

The subcommittee also said that the agency had issued only a "few meager fines" and "failed to show urgency in addressing safety hazards at the meatpacking facilities it inspected." The letter noted that OSHA had received complaints about JBS and Smithfield plants months before the agency conducted inspections.

David Seligman, a lawyer who helped meatpacking workers in Pennsylvania file a lawsuit against OSHA during the pandemic, said he hopes the subcommittee's efforts are "just one of the initial steps" to holding companies accountable and ensuring workers are safe. "The harm inflicted on meat-processing workers during this pandemic, in service of the profits of corporate meat-packing companies and under a government that seemed happy to turn a blind eye, is a grave scandal," Seligman wrote in an email.

In a statement, a Department of Labor spokesperson said that the subcommittee's inquiry is "focused on the Trump administration's actions surrounding the protection of workers from COVID-19 related risks," and the agency is committed to protecting workers, and that new guidance on coronavirus enforcement that was issued in late January will serve as a "first step."

In its Feb. 1 letters to OSHA, JBS, Tyson and Smithfield, the subcommittee has requested documents related to government inspections at meatpacking plants and COVID-19 complaints lodged with the companies. OSHA was asked to brief the subcommittee by Feb. 15.

By Bernice Young and Michael Grabell

OWH: Vaccination opponents argue for right to refuse shots at Nebraska Legislature hearing

LINCOLN — Nebraskans opposed to vaccinations filled all available hearing room seats and crowded the Capitol hallway Thursday to fight for freedom from mandatory immunizations.

Parents, nurses, chiropractors, business owners and others came out in favor of one bill guaranteeing people the right to decline mandatory vaccination during a public health emergency and against another bill that would narrow parents' ability to exempt their child from vaccinations.

Legislative Bill 643, introduced by State Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair, would declare that citizens have the right to decline a mandatory vaccine directive from the state government. It would also give parents the right to decline vaccination for their dependents and employers the right to decline for their employees.

Hansen said he doesn't expect government officials to issue a vaccination mandate in Nebraska. But Hansen said many other unexpected things happened during the past year as the state grappled with the pandemic, including orders to close businesses and restrict religious services.

"This legislation is in no way against vaccines or the COVID vaccine," he said. "This is more saying the state does not have the right to inject anything into our bodies mandatorily."

Gov. Pete Ricketts has said that he would not make coronavirus vaccinations mandatory, just as he has declined to issue a mask mandate.

LB 447, as introduced by Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha, would have removed parents' ability to opt out of having their child immunized before attending a licensed child care center. Current law allows children to skip state-mandated immunizations for medical reasons or if a parent does not want the child immunized.

At a hearing before the Health and Human Services Committee, Cavanaugh offered an amendment that would allow parents to exempt their children based on religious beliefs, similar to the exemption for children entering K-12 schools. She said parents need to consider the needs of others when deciding about immunizing their child.

"It does protect other children and child care workers and society as a whole," she said.

Dr. Michelle Walsh, a Lincoln pediatrician and president of the Nebraska Medical Association, testified in favor of Cavanaugh's bill and against Hansen's bill. She spoke from personal experience about the polio that left her father in a wheelchair and contributed to his death at age 48.

"We don't see polio now because of vaccines," she said.

Nationally, Walsh said, there has been an increase in parents opting out of getting their children vaccinated, which has lead to outbreaks of potentially deadly but preventable diseases such as measles, mumps and whooping cough. But in Nebraska, more than 97% of children are vaccinated.

But most speakers took opposite positions.

Among them was Allie French, the founder of Nebraskans Against Government Overreach, who argued that people's bodies should be sovereign. She disputed the idea that any disease outbreak could be traced to unvaccinated children and said that if parents are concerned, they can keep their children away from their unvaccinated peers.

Robert Borer said the issue was about "personal responsibility and freedom." He said that drugs and vaccines don't prevent disease and can often be harmful and deadly and that people have the right to protect their own health.

Others told of their children or themselves suffering severe reactions to vaccinations. Dan Shiermann, a nurse, said his 2-year-old son developed full-body eczema from a routine vaccination. Colleen Fogarty, a retired nurse, said she suffered encephalopathy after receiving a smallpox vaccination while she was working.

"I beg you to give me my right to refuse," she said.

Fogarty and others raised particular concerns about the safety of the coronavirus vaccines, citing a

variety of claims about their effects.
By Martha Stoddard

Imperial Republican: Gov. Ricketts moves state to least restrictive green phase

Effective last Saturday, Gov. Pete Ricketts moved Nebraska to the least restrictive phase in Nebraska's ongoing battle with COVID-19.
Ricketts announced the move from the blue to green phase at a Friday press conference.
That moves everything the state had put restrictions on to 100% capacity for gatherings, with no restrictions for bars, restaurants, churches, hair salons and barbers, gyms and elective surgeries.
However, with no new updates from the Nebraska School Activities Association (NSAA) since Ricketts' announcement, Chase County Schools Activities Director Troy Hauxwell said the school will stay at 50% capacity in its gyms.
"We follow what the NSAA has set, and as of today (Tuesday) there's nothing new telling me differently," he said.
Hauxwell said in a previous interview that as a member of NSAA, Chase County Schools follows the NSAA recommendations, which haven't always followed what the state is doing.
That has caused some miscommunication at times, Hauxwell said.
He said CCS has had no issues with a 50% cap, and hasn't turned anyone away at home basketball games.
A 50% maximum in the Longhorn gym is 532 people and it is 212 in the auxiliary gym where JV games are held. CCS has been well under that maximum, he said.
Since attendance was moved to 50% from family only, he said between 300-350 fans have attended games in the Longhorn gym.
Even with January games against Dundy County-Stratton and Perkins County, two neighboring towns, CCS wasn't close to its 532 maximum in the Longhorn gym, he noted.
The state's major change in moving from blue to green affected the Directed Health Measure (DHM) on indoor gatherings, including youth extracurriculars, moving them from 75% to 100%.
However, organizers of gatherings of 500 or more people (1,000 or more in Douglas County), must still submit a reopening plan to their local health department—and receive approval—before holding their events.
For this area, that means approval of 500+ gatherings must come from the SW Nebraska Public Health Department.
Aside from this large gathering requirement, there are no other restrictions on gatherings/venues in the green phase of the state's plan, Ricketts said.
Quarantine changes
Nebraskans who've been fully vaccinated (received both doses of the coronavirus vaccine) do not have to quarantine after a close contact, another update in the new DHM.
Instead, they will be in the "self-monitor" category, which involves wearing a mask for 14 days from the date of exposure and monitoring for symptoms.
Nebraskans who have recovered from COVID-19 in the past three months do not need to quarantine after a close contact, though they are encouraged to monitor for symptoms.
The new DHMs also amend the definition of "close contact" to clarify that exposures start 48 hours prior to the onset of symptoms or positive test.
Gov. Ricketts himself is currently following the latest quarantine guidelines.
His office announced Monday that Ricketts came into close contact with someone on Saturday who tested positive for coronavirus.
"The exposure was work-related. The Governor will complete the required seven-day quarantine," said

Taylor Gage, Director of Strategic Communications.
The Governor is not showing any symptoms, Gage said, and will get tested at the appropriate time.
The Governor will host this Friday's regular coronavirus briefing virtually.
By Jan Schultz

LJS: Vaccine opponents back bill allowing them to opt out of state directives

Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair said the state and federal response to the coronavirus pandemic illustrated how quickly the government can upend the lives of citizens.
The state lawmaker told the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee on Thursday he believed future protections need to be put in place should the government enact a mandatory vaccine directive to battle future public health emergencies.
Hansen's bill (LB643) was "in no way against vaccines or the COVID-19 vaccines," he told the committee, but was written to given individuals, parents and businesses the choice to decline a vaccine without penalty during a state of emergency or any time after.
"This is more saying the state does not have a right to inject anything into our bodies," Hansen said. "One of the things we're trying to accomplish is (to) give the people of Nebraska a kind of platform to stand on if that ever happens."
That prompted questions from Sen. Matt Williams of Gothenburg, who asked Hansen if his bill could be interpreted to allow Nebraskans to decline vaccinations "any time after for any reason whatsoever."
"It could possibly be interpreted that way," Hansen replied.
"Would that be your intent to have it interpreted that way?" Williams asked.
Hansen said that was "not necessarily" the intent of the bill, adding he believed the language of the bill could be asserted if the state was attempting to continue to mandate a vaccine even after the public health crisis was over.
Dozens of people testified in support of the bill in person Thursday, nearly all of them waiting together in close proximity in a line outside the committee room. Masks are not required at the Capitol; only a few who stood in line to speak in support wore one.
Supporting testimony ranged from personal stories about immunizations and the choice made by parents to not vaccinate their children, explanations of faith-based opposition to vaccines, assertions of individual sovereignty and constitutional rights, as well as a range of conspiracy theories and debunked claims.
"It is unconstitutional and against the inalienable rights of the citizens of this country to be forced, coerced or tricked into vaccination," Allie French said.
French added the government "has no right" to force an individual to get a shot if it was against their religion or philosophical beliefs.
Several registered nurses and other health care workers also spoke in support of Hansen's bill, saying they believed a mandatory vaccination program would remove a patient's ability to give consent to a medical procedure.
"I beg you to give me my right to refuse," said Colleen Fogarty, a retired pediatric nurse.
Living with an autoimmune disorder, Tyler Hackbart, a chiropractor from Seward, said he has never received a vaccine. He asked the senators to "use the best evidence you have and then make a faith decision" in advancing the bill from committee.
"I'm for the freedom to choose for myself and my family, and I hope you guys are, too," Hackbart said.
Others said they believed vaccines were the underlying cause of autism — a widely spread claim debunked by researchers — as well as other diseases, or offered discredited conspiracy theories about vaccines being used to assert control over the population.

Only one person testified in opposition Thursday.
Dr. Michelle Walsh, a Lincoln pediatrician and the president of the Nebraska Medical Association, said declining immunization rates in Nebraska and elsewhere have resulted in increased instances of measles, mumps and whooping cough.
She also reiterated Williams' concern from the beginning of the hearing, saying the NMA also interpreted the bill's language to apply "in perpetuity," and said it wasn't clear how Hansen's bill would reconcile with school immunization requirements currently in state law.
To attend public or private school in Nebraska, children must be immunized against polio, chicken pox, measles, mumps and rubella, among other diseases largely stamped out due to vaccines.
"We have serious concerns that LB643 would be contradictory to these existing policies and allow parents to opt out with no sincere reasons," Walsh said. "This would, in effect, raise the rates of future types of preventable disease outbreaks which have been under control for decades."
The committee took no action on the bill Thursday.
At the end of the hearing, Hansen said LB643 "struck a chord" with many, adding the Legislature is considering several bills where the pandemic exposed a need for action, including expanding SNAP benefits, implementing protections for tenants, and providing aid to businesses.
"Where are we going to be at during the next emergency?" he asked. "That's why it's important to look at this now."
By Chris Dunker

AP: Nebraska will receive 21% more vaccine doses this week

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska will receive 21% more doses of coronavirus vaccines this week as the state continues to work to speed up distribution of the shots.
The state said it is scheduled to receive 55,950 doses of the vaccines this week. That is up from 46,400 a week ago.
The increase in doses should help boost distribution of the vaccine statewide. The 19 local health districts across Nebraska are finishing up the first phase of the campaign when health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities were the focus, and now they are all starting to vaccinate people 65 and older and some essential workers.
"We are moving as fast as we possibly can. As we get it from the federal government, we are getting it out to our partners so that people can be inoculated as soon as possible," said Dannette Smith, CEO of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
State officials are planning to hold a series of online town hall meetings over the next month to answer questions about the vaccines and the virus.
The state said 3.9% of the state's population has now received both required doses of one of the two vaccines. Nebraska has administered 207,111 of the 300,400 doses it has been allocated so far, including 9,027 that were administered Wednesday.
Less than a week after the state launched its new vaccinate.ne.gov website, nearly 141,000 people have registered to be notified when they are eligible to get the vaccine.
The number of people hospitalized with the coronavirus declined Wednesday to 278 from Tuesday's 305. That total has fallen steadily since the November peak of 987.
The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Nebraska decreased over the past two weeks, going from 806.86 new cases per day on Jan. 20 to 560 new cases per day on Wednesday. The state said 192,549 virus cases and 1,952 deaths have been reported in the state since the pandemic began.

LJS: Online town halls planned in Lincoln, elsewhere to educate people of color about

COVID-19 vaccine

In an effort to answer questions and assuage fears about the COVID-19 vaccine among communities of color, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services is partnering with several organizations to hold online town halls over the next several months.

The first two will be focused on Lincoln. The first is set for Wednesday at 7 p.m. and is being done in concert with Mount Zion Baptist Church.

The second one is scheduled for Feb. 18 in cooperation with the Lincoln Chapter of the NAACP.

The Rev. Tremaine Combs, senior pastor at Mount Zion, said he is not trying to push the vaccine on anyone but wants to offer a venue where people can get information in a comfortable and empowering setting.

"The goal is to provide an opportunity and a space for people to ask questions," he said.

Combs said it's also an opportunity for public health officials to "rebuild trust" with the Black community.

A third Lincoln-focused event will be Feb. 25 in partnership with Bluestem Health and the New Era Baptist State Convention of Nebraska.

An Omaha event is set for Feb. 23, and there is one scheduled March 13 with the Grand Island Multicultural Coalition.

Dannette Smith, CEO of the Department of Health and Human Services, said many of the town halls are meant to coincide with Black History Month in February.

"I'm looking forward to all these town hall meetings as a way to talk about equity, as a way to talk about the impact of health care on people of color throughout Nebraska," Smith said during a Facebook Live session Thursday.

The town halls will be an opportunity to answer questions and educate people in vulnerable communities about why they should get vaccinated.

"There is some hesitancy to taking the vaccine, and we understand for the minority community that sometimes that can be very difficult," she said.

Smith, who is Black, noted that she grew up with "folklore" regarding health care and medicine, and one of the goals of the town halls is to "decrease some of that folklore stuff" for communities of color and "give you real-time information that makes sense about why you need to take the vaccine."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Blacks and Hispanics are both about four times as likely as whites to be hospitalized if they contract a COVID-19 infection, and nearly three times as likely to die.

Despite those figures, surveys have found that only about a quarter of Black Americans and about one-third of the Latino community say they plan to get the vaccine.

Brad Meyer, CEO of Bluestem Health, said about 45% of the organization's patients speak a first language that's not English, making communication sometimes difficult.

He also said that some of the groups it serves have skeptical views of Western medicine, and he's heard anecdotal evidence that there are many people who don't plan to get vaccinated.

"Our goal is to break down these preconceived notions and try to answer any questions as to why they feel it's not safe to get the vaccine," Meyer said.

Smith said that once more vaccine is available, the state will work with community partners to ensure those who are most vulnerable and most in need of it have access.

The Department of Health and Human Services said late Wednesday that it is getting an additional boost in vaccine supply. Last week, officials said the state would be getting about 16% more vaccine doses for the next several weeks, but in a news release, the department said it is receiving 21% more this week, for a total of 30,125 first doses of Pfizer and Moderna vaccine and 25,825 second doses.

It said it also will be receiving an additional 17,500 doses of Pfizer vaccines over the next couple of weeks

that were overallocated to the Federal Pharmacy Program.
As of Thursday, about 134,000 people had signed up on the state's vaccine registration website.
Nebraska so far has been allocated just over 300,000 vaccine doses and had administered 207,000 of them as of Wednesday, a nearly 70% rate. However, out of the roughly 207,000 doses that the Department of Health and Human Services has control of, the vaccination rate is closer to 80%, with 90% of all first doses administered so far.
"We are moving as fast as we possibly can," Smith said.
By Matt Olberding

OWH: Nebraska participating in both federal COVID vaccination programs involving pharmacies

Nebraska is participating in both of the available federal programs created to send COVID-19 vaccines to pharmacies in the state, health officials said Thursday.
Pharmacies participating in the first program, dubbed the Federal Pharmacy Program, already have vaccinated many residents and staff of Nebraska's long-term care facilities.
Allocations were made through the program over a six-week period, including four weeks of 11,700 first doses of the Pfizer vaccine between Dec. 20 and Jan. 16, and four weeks of 11,700 second doses of Pfizer vaccine between Jan. 3 and Jan. 30, health officials said.
Allocations required for the program were determined by the federal government.
Now that participating pharmacies have completed all first-dose clinics at the facilities and multiple second-dose clinics, the pharmacies have begun tallying how many doses they have left over, Khalilah LeGrand, a spokeswoman for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, said in an email.
Pharmacy chain CVS is returning 5,850 doses to the state this week, and Walgreens will return 11,700 doses over the next two weeks. The doses will be used to vaccinate people in the state's Phase 1B category, which includes people ages 65 and older, younger people with high-risk medical conditions and certain front-line workers who can't work from home.
State health officials have said the leftover doses, like others the state receives, will be allocated within the state according to population.
Some observers have criticized the state, suggesting that officials have opted out of some federal programs that could bring more vaccine to Nebraska.
Douglas County received some of the leftover doses this week, Adi Pour, director of the Douglas County Health Department, said earlier this week.
Iowa health officials announced Wednesday that the state was making doses left over from the long-term care initiative available to approximately 32,000 Iowans ages 65 and older. The doses, a one-time additional allocation, were distributed to a limited number of Walgreens and CVS stores in the state and will be available by appointment. In western Iowa, appointments were made available at some Walgreens locations in Pottawattamie and Woodbury Counties.
LeGrand said Nebraska also is participating in the separate federal Retail Pharmacy Program. State officials are waiting for information from the federal government about what the allocation will be through that program. The program will bring additional doses to the state.
According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Retail Pharmacy Program is a collaboration with 21 national pharmacy partners and independent pharmacy networks. In Nebraska, pharmacy partners include Walmart and several pharmacy networks and suppliers.
The program, according to CDC, is being implemented incrementally based on available vaccine supply. As vaccine supply increases over time, the program ultimately will expand to include more than 40,000 pharmacies.

State health officials have said the state does not plan to ask the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide a vaccination site in Nebraska because it would not bring additional allocations of vaccine into the state and the state is doing well with the number of vaccination sites currently in operation.

The state health department reported Wednesday that the state is receiving 30,125 first doses of vaccine this week and 25,825 second doses.

Dannette Smith, the health department's CEO, said Thursday that the state will hold town hall meetings across the state in the coming weeks to provide education about vaccines.

During the seven days ending Thursday, Smith said, more than 134,000 Nebraskans had registered for the vaccine through the state's vaccination portal, vaccinate.ne.gov.

By Julie Anderson

GII: 1,000 seniors vaccinated at Fonner Park drive-thru clinic

On Thursday morning, 1.4 inches of snow wasn't enough to keep 1,000 senior citizens from getting their initial COVID-19 vaccinations at Fonner Park.

The shots were administered in drive-thru fashion inside the sheep barn at Fonner Park. The recipients first pulled into the Tom Dinsdale Automotive Cattle Barn to get registered. They then circled around to get their vaccinations inside the sheep barn.

Most of the recipients were 80 and older, and they were happy to be vaccinated.

"Damn right," A.J. Haller said after he got his shot. The 82-year-old Grand Island man hasn't had COVID-19. His wife, Brenda, registered for him two or three weeks ago, and they got a call this week telling him when to show up.

His wife hasn't had her turn yet. "She's only 68," Haller said.

Keith and Carol Haussler, who live north of Juniata, were also pleased to get their vaccinations.

Carol, 79, contracted COVID-19 in November. The symptoms never got too bad, but she was cold and tired for a week. She also didn't eat much because she was afraid food might make her sick.

Keith, 77, slept in his shop while his wife had the virus, checking on her two or three times a day. He was comfortable in the shop with a recliner and a wood stove.

Why didn't he get the virus himself? "Blind luck," he said.

Recipients said the vaccinations didn't hurt. "I didn't even scream," Keith said.

To celebrate the occasion, the Hausslers headed for Olive Garden after their vaccinations.

Another happy recipient was Gwen Hassler of Grand Island. "I think it's a great thing," she said.

Hassler, 82, registered about three weeks ago. "And then my daughter did it again for me. And I think that helped me," she said.

Hassler never got COVID-19. "I'm very good about staying home," she said.

She has a cat named Toby. "And the two of us stay home all day," she said. "I go to the grocery store and to church. That's about all I do."

Every once in a while, her son-in-law comes in from York to take her to a restaurant.

The senior citizens were glad to get their shots. "They're very happy people coming through," said Teresa Anderson of the Central District Health Department.

The vaccination clinic was put together by CDHD in partnership with Fonner Park and CHI Health St. Francis.

Initially, organizers planned to hold the clinic in one building, but, on Wednesday, Fonner Park "generously offered us" the second barn as well, Anderson said.

The two buildings provided plenty of room for social distancing. The indoor locations also allowed the staff and volunteers to "stay somewhat warm," Anderson said.

CDHD has set up a tent in its parking lot for both testing and vaccinations. But Fonner Park provides much more space.
There was no way 1,000 doses could be administered in one day “on our campus,” Anderson said.
The seniors got their first doses at Thursday’s clinic, which was by appointment only. They’ll get their second shots in three weeks.
Plenty of people were on hand to help in the two barns. Five or six nurses from CHI St. Francis were joined by nurses from Central District Health, representatives of Wood River Fire and Rescue, the Grand Island Fire Department and the Community Emergency Response Team. Some of the people helping were volunteering their time.
Jon Rosenlund, director of emergency management for Grand Island and Hall County, welcomed drivers as they pulled into the cattle barn.
Nick Lammers of Wood River Fire and Rescue said giving people vaccinations now will help his department later. Since March, Wood River emergency personnel have taken some COVID-19 patients to the hospital. “We’ve had our share,” Lammers said.
Lammers, who’s a paramedic, was giving shots Thursday. Also on hand from Wood River Fire and Rescue was Judy Knecht, an EMT. One of the St. Francis nurses was Vicky English.
The clinic started at 8:30 a.m. and finished by 3:30 p.m.
How quickly did cars cruise through the barns? By 11:30 a.m., 350 people had been vaccinated.
Nurses were reconstituting the Pfizer vaccine in the birthing pavilion inside the sheep barn. Working in the warmer environment helped them with their manual dexterity. They filled syringes after a sterile saline solution was mixed with the vaccine.
Among the people reconstituting the vaccine were Julie Brazee of Central City and Kamrie Peterson of Polk. Both work for Central District Health.
After their vaccinations, recipients were told to wait in the parking lot for 15 minutes to make sure they didn’t react badly.
This week, CDHD exhausted its list of people 80 and older. So appointments were made Thursday for some people in their late 70s.
After the Pfizer vaccine is removed from subzero temperatures, it must be used within five days. So health officials were anxious to use as much of the vaccine as they could.
The flow of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to Grand Island is starting to increase, “which is really awesome,” Anderson said.
Plans call for people 70 and older to get their first shots next week, also at Fonner Park. The week after that, vaccinations may be ready for people 65 and older and those with underlying health conditions.
Two or three vaccination clinics may be held next week at Fonner Park.
To register for a vaccination, visit vaccinate.ne.gov. For assistance, call 833-998-2275.
By Jeff Bahr

KETV: Corrections, courts make plea to state leaders to move up in vaccination line

DOUGLAS COUNTY, Neb. —
Corrections officials and courthouse employees are urging to the state to consider moving them up the vaccine line.
Douglas County corrections director Michael Myers said cells are hard to come by in the jail right now.
“There’s times where we've had to house people in our gymnasiums to make room for people,” he said.
Myers said because more serious felony cases are awaiting trial, they're moving people to places they've never had to before.
"What we've seen is, those serious violent cases start stacking up in the jail which is causing us to be

short on bed space that's acceptable," he said.
Myers says violent offenders must be housed in cells, and not general population, which makes finding bed space a puzzle.

“We had 20 people sleeping in our court holding, (to make room in cells) which is something that's pretty much unprecedented for us,” Myers said.
Myers is pleading with the state to move all corrections staff and inmates up in the vaccination line, so courts can resume, which would move inmates out of the jail.
"As we wait for those (vaccine) opportunities to happen, crimes are still being committed,” he said.
"The key to their (the courts) return to full functionality, to these higher-level cases that have been delayed, is the vaccination of their staff, and defendants,” Myers said.
“We’ll probably all be vaccinated, be getting our first doses in April, second doses in May, and the courts are behind us,” he said.

Douglas County Deputy Attorney Brenda Beadle has the same plea to the state.
"Please let us move up on the vaccination list,” she said.
That's because the courts are opening, vaccine or not, and with a monumental goal. The courts scheduled 83 trials for March.
"Now we're in a position where we have to prep for 83 jury trials, very serious trials. We have to bring witnesses in, we’re doing depositions,” she said.
Beadle said that forced the prosecutor’s office to throw their safety protocols out to prepare. She said masks will be worn in the office, but they want to be vaccinated.
Judges explained to Beadle that the trials are stacked, meaning they can move from one to the next if something comes up. Beadle said that doesn’t alleviate the workload, because attorneys will have to be prepared in case any docket is called.
“We had to bring everybody back. Which, we had been doing two weeks on, two weeks off (out of the office) and that was working well, but we didn't have a choice because we had to get ready for 83 jury trials,” she said.
Beadle said between prosecutors and public defenders, they’d need about 200 vaccines. She understands the state’s prioritization but hopes courts will be moved up in the list.
"We are frontline, and we are going to have to be in the courtroom dealing with the public, we have over 1000 people coming into the courthouse monthly,” she said.
Beadle said prosecutors will begin preparing, but the caseload is overwhelming to juggle. Plus, there’s the threat of the virus shutting things down.
"We're going to roll up our sleeved and get to work. We'll see if we can get through any without any continuances or mistrials because of COVID,” she said.
Both corrections and the courts are hopeful the state will hear their plea.
By Sarah Fili

OWH: Omaha Police Department employees getting their first COVID vaccine shots

All Omaha Police Department employees are slated to get their first COVID-19 vaccine shots by Monday. Thursday was the first day that members of the state’s largest law enforcement agency could receive their initial shot of the Pfizer vaccine.
Clinics will continue Friday and Monday to ensure that anyone in the 1,084-employee department who wants the shot can get the shot. That total includes 865 full-time sworn officers and 42 part-time sworn officers plus 147 full-time civilian employees and 30 part-time civilian employees.

Chief Todd Schmaderer, among other officers, got his first dose Thursday.
Lt. Sherie Thomas, a police department spokesperson, said it was important for department employees to be vaccinated because of their health and "to keep them safe as they work to keep our community safe."
"Law enforcement officers have an inherently dangerous job as it is, and the coronavirus adds to that," she said in a statement. "We are glad that OPD employees are able to get the vaccine."
Thomas said that since the beginning of the pandemic, 236 employees, which includes sworn officers and civilian workers, have tested positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.
Omaha firefighters, who all are trained EMTs or paramedics, were able to get their first shots in late December.
Assistant Fire Chief Kathy Bossman said the department is in the midst of the six clinics scheduled to dole out the second dose, with two clinics left.
When those are finished, roughly two-thirds of the fire department will be fully vaccinated, she said. For workers who were out of town, had to isolate or initially didn't choose to get the vaccine, the Douglas County Health Department has been flexible in allowing those people to get inoculated at other clinics, Bossman said.
By Alia Conley

OWH: Nebraska bill to triple fines against officials who enact, then violate, health measures draws no support

LINCOLN — No one testified Thursday in support of a legislative bill that would triple fines against public officials who enact mask mandates and other public health measures and then violate them.
The state senator who introduced the proposal, Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair, didn't cite any examples of that happening in Nebraska, instead calling his Legislative Bill 645 a "proactive" measure against what he called "egregious oversteps" by local officials during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Jack Cheloha, who lobbies for the City of Omaha, testified against the measure, saying it was probably an unconstitutional violation of the equal protection clause by enacting a higher penalty for one class or people. He also said the bill would punish a city clerk, even though they didn't vote and just documented the enactment of a health measure.
"The pandemic we're facing now is unprecedented," Cheloha told the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee. "The city council has the authority to protect the safety, health and welfare of its people. They're all public citizens. They have the obligation to follow (directed health measures) like everyone else."
LB 645 calls for tripling the normal fine if a public official violates a directed health measure that they signed, authorized or enacted. If a criminal offense was committed, the bills calls for enhancing the offense by the next higher penalty levels. The bill would apply to city, council or local health officials, as well as the governor, a mayor or city manager.
While Hansen didn't cite any examples Thursday of missteps by Nebraska officials, the issue of public officials violating restrictions they signed has come up nationally. A recall effort against California Gov. Gavin Newson gained steam in November after he was seen dining at a pricey Napa Valley restaurant, without masks or socially distanced, in violation of restrictions he helped set.
Hansen said that directed health measures have hurt businesses and caused political turmoil.
"When the people who enact these orders don't abide by them, that is something I cannot tolerate," the senator said.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: Lancaster County reports 3 more COVID-19 deaths

Three more Lancaster County residents have died of coronavirus and an additional 51 county residents have contracted COVID-19, the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported Thursday.
The Health Department in a news release identified the deceased as two women in their 70s who were both hospitalized, and a man in his 60s who was at home.
Their deaths raised the local pandemic death toll to 205, and thus far in the pandemic, 27,009 Lancaster County residents have contracted COVID-19, according to the Health Department.
COVID-19 hospitalizations remain comparatively low with 49 patients with the virus in the care of Lincoln hospitals on Thursday.
The 49 patients included 36 from Lancaster County and two who were on ventilators, the news release said.
Daily hospitalizations have fallen from nearly 100 in late December and early January, according to the Health Department.
Statewide, hospitalizations dropped to 278, the lowest figure since October.
By Riley Johnson

Hastings Tribune: South Heartland's COVID-19 risk reading dips again as vaccinations continue

The South Heartland Health District's COVID-19 risk dial reading for this week dropped again within the "elevated" zone as vaccinations of senior citizens continued.
The risk dial reading, which is updated once per week on Wednesdays, dropped to 2.2 from 2.4 for the previous week, the district health department said in a news release.
The new reading is toward the low end of the elevated zone, which is color-coded orange and includes readings of 2-3 on the dial.
The dial, which assesses danger associated with further local spread of the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19, is based on various metrics related to movement of the virus in local communities and related testing, tracing and treatment capacities.
The dial has four zones: Low risk (zero to 1), moderate (1-2), elevated (2-3) and severe (3-4). The South Heartland reading has bounced around within the orange zone for several recent weeks but now has dropped for a second consecutive week.
In Wednesday's news release, Michele Bever, the district health department executive director, credited the current downward trend in daily tallies of new confirmed cases as a key factor in the risk reading's decline.
"The main driver for this drop is the 14-day average of new daily cases, which decreased to 32 per 100,000 for the week ending Jan. 30," Bever said.
As of Wednesday evening, the 14-day average had dropped to 30 new daily cases per 100,000, according to South Heartland's COVID-19 dashboard posted online at www.southheartland.com.
That figure is extrapolated since the total population of the health district — Adams, Webster, Clay and Nuckolls counties — is only around 45,000.
"Our high was a 14-day average of 118 cases per 100,000 on Nov. 20, and our goal is eight or fewer new daily cases per 100,000," Bever said. "We are headed in the right direction."
Bever said hospital capacity indicators were similar to Wednesday of last week.
According to South Heartland's hospital capacity dashboard on Wednesday, 45% of intensive care beds in district hospitals were available for new patients. Nineteen percent of in-patients — seven in all — were COVID-19-positive, with one needing a ventilator.

The health district has three hospitals: Mary Lanning Healthcare in Hastings, Brodstone Memorial Hospital in Superior, and Webster County Community Hospital in Red Cloud.

In another news release Thursday night, Bever announced a total of 30 new COVID-19 cases being confirmed for Tuesday through Thursday — 15 in Adams County, six in Clay, eight in Nuckolls and one in Webster.

Meanwhile, injections continue in the health district under terms of the state of Nebraska's vaccination plan. South Heartland is in its second week of vaccinations under Phase 1B of the plan, which covers the general population of senior citizens age 65 and up, plus other adults with underlying high-risk health conditions and designated categories of essential workers.

On Monday, Bever announced the health department had been told it would receive 800 first doses of the Moderna vaccine product this week — up by 200 doses from last week — and that about 340 second doses of Moderna vaccine would be administered in the district this week, as well.

The expected vaccine arrived Tuesday afternoon. By Thursday night, Bever said, 60% of it had gone into district residents' arms.

Currently, two vaccine products have been approved for emergency use nationwide: the one produced by Pfizer and BioNTech and the one by Moderna. Supplies are limited, so a plan for orderly distribution is necessary.

South Heartland's main focus at the moment is on vaccinating the senior citizens, with a reverse-age approach starting with the oldest.

"Ninety percent of this week's vaccine allotment will be directed toward our elderly who are at highest risk," Bever said. "We will again use a small percent of this week's doses for essential workers such as law enforcement, fire department personnel, and utilities, as well as some health workers from Phase 1A."

(Phase 1A, which began when the first Pfizer vaccines arrived in mid-December 2020, was for frontline health care workers and emergency medical services personnel, as well as for long-term care residents and employees. Vaccinations for the the long-term care group were coordinated by major pharmacies through a separate government program.)

South Heartland, which is headquartered in Hastings, is working with health care partners throughout the district to get the vaccines administered.

"Residents can register to get the vaccine on our website where we have a link to Nebraska's vaccine registration system," Bever said. "You will be notified when it is your turn to schedule an appointment. Watch the local news media, the health department website and the SHDHD Facebook page for updated information about the status and timeline of the vaccine distribution process."

With the health department still relying on weekly allotments of vaccine and the large population of senior citizens in the South Heartland district, Phase 1B is expected to be a lengthy one.

"We are asking for patience with the vaccine," Bever said. "Due to limited amounts of vaccine coming to us each week, it will take many months for everyone who wants the vaccine to get it. If you are in the current priority group of age 65+, it may still be many weeks before it is your turn."

Although Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts recently relaxed directed health measures across the state due to current improvements in COVID-19 metrics, precautions remain critically important to preventing a resurgence in infections.

"All of these steps we are taking, all the tools we are using to block the spread of the coronavirus, are working to protect the health care system and to protect our most vulnerable," Bever said. "We need to continue doing what's working. We need to avoid the three Cs: avoid crowded places, avoid close contact, avoid confined spaces. We need to continue to wear masks that cover our noses and mouths, we need to stay home when we are sick, we need to disinfect frequently-touched surfaces and objects, we need to wash our hands, and we need to get the COVID vaccine when it is our turn."

As of Thursday night, a total of more than 3,100 first doses of vaccine and more than 1,000 second doses

had been administered in the district since mid-December. Those numbers don't include the vaccinations delivered at long-term care facilities, which likely number in the hundreds.
By Andy Raun

LJS: Nebraska AG joins $573M multistate settlement with company for its role in opioid crisis

Nebraska will share in a $573 million settlement with one of the world's largest consulting firms for its role in the opioid epidemic.
Nebraska is among 47 states, the District of Columbia and five U.S. territories involved in the settlement with McKinsey & Co., which resolves investigations into the company's role in helping opioid companies promote their drugs, and profiting from the opioid epidemic.
Nebraska will receive $2.6 million over the next five years and will use the money to combat the epidemic in the state, according to a news release from Attorney General Doug Peterson's office.
This is the first multistate opioid settlement to result in substantial payment to the states to address the epidemic.
Last year, the Nebraska Legislature enacted the Opioid Prevention and Treatment Act, which requires all settlement monies from any opioid-related defendants be deposited in an Opioid Recovery Fund and used for treatment, prevention and law enforcement costs related to the opioid crisis in the state.
The agreement also calls for McKinsey to prepare tens of thousands of its internal documents detailing its work for OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma and other opioid companies for public disclosure online.
A complaint, filed with the settlement, details how McKinsey advised Purdue on how to maximize profits from its opioid products, including targeting high-volume opioid prescribers, using specific messaging to get physicians to prescribe more OxyContin to more patients, and circumventing pharmacy restrictions in order to deliver high-dose prescriptions, the release said.
By Margaret Reist

AP: Nebraska to get $2.59M as part of national opioid settlement

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska will receive $2.59 million over five years as part of a multistate settlement with a firm that worked with opioid manufacturers to promote addictive painkillers, Attorney General Doug Peterson said Thursday.
Peterson said Nebraska is part of a coalition of 53 attorneys general who collectively won $573 million in a settlement with McKinsey & Company, one of the world's largest consulting firms. The settlement will be split among 47 states, five U.S. territories and the District of Columbia.
The settlement will be used to address problems caused by opioids in the participating states. It's the first multistate opioid settlement to result in a substantial payout to states.
"Today's filing is a significant action towards Nebraska's effort to combat the opioid epidemic and to hold accountable those who are responsible for creating and perpetuating the crisis," Peterson said in a statement.
Nebraska lawmakers passed the Opioid Prevention and Treatment Act in 2020, a law that requires all opioid settlement money received to go into a special fund for treatment, prevention and law enforcement purposes aimed at the epidemic.
The settlement calls for McKinsey to prepare internal documents detailing its work with Purdue Pharma and other opioid companies for public disclosure online.

OWH: Bill seeks $75M more in funding, which could go to future CHI Health Center upgrades

Omaha's downtown convention center and arena, now 17 years old, may need renovations and new parking options within the decade, city officials say.

With those future expenses in mind, the city is advocating passage of a proposed legislative bill that could partially fund facility improvements by doubling the amount of arena financing incentive money the city can receive to pay off its arena and convention center debt.

Legislative Bill 181, introduced by State Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, would amend the Convention Center Facility Financing Assistance Act to raise the cap of available so-called turnback tax from $75 million to $150 million.

Under the turnback tax mechanism, the state turns back to the City of Omaha 70% of state sales tax from nearby hotels and sales inside the facility to help pay back the city's debt on the convention center and arena. The $291 million facility, opened in 2003, was the first project in Nebraska to make use of the 1999 turnback tax program.

The turnback tax has also been used to build Lincoln's Pinnacle Bank Arena and the Ralston Arena. A portion of the money also provides grants for tourism in areas with high concentrations of poverty, youth violence prevention efforts and community centers in rural communities.

Omaha expects to have received its full $75 million in turnback taxes roughly around the time it pays off the CHI Health Center in 2027, said Steve Curtiss, the city's finance director. Around the same time, the facility could be "in line for major renovations," Curtiss said.

"We're getting closer and closer to the cap," said Jack Cheloha, the city's lobbyist. "Therefore, we thought it would be a prudent option in a bill to try to raise that dollar amount."

By the end of 2019, Omaha had received about $38 million in state turnback taxes.

Over time, those annual payments have increased. The city has received an average of $3.4 million a year in turnback since 2017, when a different piece of legislation incorporated all hotels within 600 yards of the facility, up from 200 yards, into the turnback tax mechanism. That change made at least one other hotel, the Marriott in the Capitol District, eligible.

No specific renovation or parking plans have been proposed for the CHI Health Center. But there long has been talk of commercial development one day coming to the Lot B parking lot located west of the convention center between TD Ameritrade Park and the Hilton Omaha hotel.

If the convention center were to lose that parking capacity, the city's agreement with the Metropolitan Entertainment and Convention Authority — the group that manages the CHI Health Center — says that the city must provide at least an equivalent amount of parking spaces.

That could mean construction of a parking garage on the Lot D parking lot north of the CHI Health Center, said Roger Dixon, MECA's president and CEO.

"(The city) could use some of this money to do that, if it even gets to that point," Dixon said.

LB 181 would amend the convention center assistance act to allow parking structures to benefit from the turnback tax.

Discussions on a potential expansion of the CHI between MECA and Visit Omaha, the city's convention and visitors bureau, have included the possibility of expanding meeting space, Dixon said. But it's "anybody's guess" what such an expansion could look like, he said.

Omaha spends about $19 million per year to pay off its arena and convention center debt. Between 2000 and 2019, the city has paid about $263.2 million (in principal and interest) toward the convention center and arena.

A hearing date on LB 181 had not been set as of Thursday.

Said Linehan of the proposed bill: "I want to help Omaha grow and thrive."

By Reece Ristau

OWH: Victim advocates push bill to extend protection orders in Nebraska from one year to

five

LINCOLN — Angie Lauritsen said she and her family lived in constant fear after they took out a protection order against a person she alleged had physically, mentally and sexually abused her.
The alleged abuser was quickly released on bail after being arrested, she said.
That's when the stalking began, Lauritsen said, at her home and at her place of employment, even though a judge had ordered the person not to contact or harass her or her family.
She said sheriff's deputies responded when she called for help, but the protection order ended after a year.
"We were on our own," she said.
On Friday, Lauritsen and other advocates will be supporting a bill that would extend the duration of protection orders for victims of abuse and harassment from one year to five years. Legislative Bill 118 also would waive the requirement that applications for such orders, and an accompanying affidavit, be signed in front of a notary public.
State Sen. Adam Morfeld of Lincoln, the bill's main sponsor, said the measure was "first and foremost" about increasing safety for those in fear and removing unnecessary barriers for getting help.
Often, he and other advocates said, people don't realize that protection orders expire after a year or that they can be renewed. And, they said, there's often reluctance to renew the protection order because it requires reliving some of the initial trauma, or facing your harasser in court.
Hillary Wasserburger, executive director of a Panhandle program that helps victims of domestic and sexual abuse, said extending the duration of protection orders to five years would help remove that trauma.
In her rural area, she said, it's often hard to find a notary public to verify a protection order filing, especially now, during the coronavirus pandemic.
Neighboring Colorado allows lifetime protection orders, Wasserburger said, so those who move to Nebraska are surprised that such orders extend for only a year here. A longer-lasting protection order, she and other advocates said, would give abuse victims more time to find a safe home and a safe job.
LB 118 is viewed as the next step being taken by advocates for victims of abuse to shore up the state's laws on protection orders. Two years ago, they won approval of a law that prevented, in many cases, the dismissal of an application for such an order without a judge holding a hearing. That came in the wake of a case in Omaha in which a protection order had been denied without a hearing, and the applicant was later severely burned in a fire at the family home that authorities have said was set by her husband.
The Legislature's Judiciary Committee will take testimony Friday morning on the bill.
Opposition to the measure is anticipated. There's concern about allowing longer-lasting protection orders without judicial reviews. Family law attorneys also maintain that protection orders are sometimes used to retaliate against a spouse and don't require proof of the allegations.
By Paul Hammel

OWH: Bill would force ethanol plant near Mead to stop using pesticide-treated seed corn

LINCOLN — State lawmakers were urged Wednesday to quickly advance and pass a bill that would force an ethanol plant near Mead to stop using pesticide-treated seed corn to produce fuel.
Nearby residents have been complaining since 2018, without resolution, about adverse health effects and potential groundwater contamination from tens of thousands of tons of pesticide-laden corn waste after the ethanol process at the AltEn plant, a state legislative committee was told.
Former State Sen. Loran Schmit said he was mystified that the state had permitted the facility near Mead to use excess seed corn, coated in pesticides, to produce ethanol.

No other ethanol plants have ever been willing to “take a chance” using such contaminated grain, said Schmit, who championed the ethanol industry in the Legislature in the 1970s and later as a lobbyist.
“It’s important that this practice stop, and the practice stop immediately,” he said.
The AltEn plant has been given a deadline of March 1 by state regulators to remove the grain piles at their plant.
State Sen. Bruce Bostelman of Brainard, who introduced Legislative Bill 507 to force some action, said the company has two options: find a licensed landfill that will take the leftover grain, or incinerate it.
Typical ethanol plants, which use field corn, produce leftover “distillers grain” that is a prized cattle feed. But AltEn’s leftover grain cannot be fed to livestock because of the residual neonicotinoids, which a representative of the Sierra Club said has been traced to the huge decline in birds worldwide and other environmental problems.
A representative of AltEn declined to comment Wednesday on the company’s plans to dispose of the grain. Scott Tingelhoff of AltEn instead sent a corporate statement, issued several days ago, saying the firm is cooperating with state regulators and is taking environmental concerns “seriously.”
One Mead resident, Jody Weible, said she was concerned that AltEn would go bankrupt, leaving the small town to clean up the grain piles.
A trade group, Renewable Fuels Nebraska, testified via letter that it supports the idea that ethanol plants only produce beneficial byproducts.
By Paul Hammel

NP Telegraph: State senators urge Game and Parks Commission to relocate closer to western Nebraska

A top Nebraska Game and Parks Commission official wasn’t too keen Thursday on the idea of moving its state headquarters to Sidney or anywhere outside Lincoln.
A trio of Sidney community leaders were naturally more enthusiastic as state Sens. Steve Erdman of Bayard and Dan Hughes of Venango presented their separate relocation bills before the Legislature’s Natural Resources Committee.
Erdman’s Legislative Bill 562 would specifically order Game and Parks by mid-2023 to set up its headquarters in Sidney — most likely in one or both of the former Cabela’s headquarters buildings.
Hughes’ LB 668 would cast a wider net, requiring the agency to relocate to a county of 10,000 people or less and at least 200 miles from Omaha or Lincoln. It also would require a move by mid-2023.
Erdman’s testimony on LB 562 partly reflected rural complaints that Game and Parks leaders don’t do enough to address farm and ranch damage from wildlife or management and facilities at Lake McConaughy and other western state parks.
Making the agency relocate its base to Sidney “would locate Game and Parks headquarters closer to where those issues are,” Erdman said.
He and Hughes also emphasized the idea that state government doesn’t have to base all its departments in Lincoln, particularly with modern technology.
The COVID-19 pandemic, both senators said, has proved that state government can do much of its business remotely.
Hughes, a Natural Resources Committee member and the panel’s former chairman, said he introduced LB 668 to encourage lawmakers to think about spreading out state government more broadly so rural Nebraska communities can benefit from its tax dollars.
“I don’t care where Game and Parks is located as long as it’s outside of Lincoln somewhere,” he told his colleagues.
“But I think we need to have a philosophical discussion about the money that we spend in state

government and how it's concentrated in a very small area."
Sidney's top two elected leaders, joined by a former Lincoln resident now living there, said they're set up well to absorb most or all of Game and Parks' home-office employees.
Mayor Roger Gallaway and Vice Mayor Bob Olsen said gaining an anchor tenant like Game and Parks would raise the odds of the high-tech Cabela's headquarters buildings being sold and reoccupied.
They said Bass Pro Shops, which bought Cabela's in 2017 after a national hedge fund forced a sale, has sold the other buildings that once powered the Panhandle-grown "World's Foremost Outfitter."
Most of those other buildings have been taken over by a broad range of businesses started or recruited since the sale to Bass Pro cost Cheyenne County some 2,000 residents.
Brad Sherman, United Parcel Service's Panhandle operations manager, also cited Sidney's new high school and hospital and a shovel-ready housing development — all byproducts of Cabela's past investments.
He said he had to "drag my family kicking and screaming" to Sidney in 2007 after living in Lincoln for 25 years. His three children stayed in the Sidney area and have given him three grandchildren, Sherman said.
Timothy McCoy, Game and Parks' deputy director, opposed both bills for the geographic distance from Lincoln they would impose and the disruptions they would create for the headquarters' 180-some employees.
Many of them regularly consult or work with other Lincoln-based state agencies and federal and University of Nebraska-Lincoln researchers, McCoy said.
Add in the careers of Lincoln employees' spouses, and either bill "would require them to have very difficult decisions about 'Do we go or do we stay?'" he said.
Besides, "the bulk of our agency staff are not in our Lincoln office. They are out across the state."
"It's the same distance from Sidney to Lincoln that it is from Lincoln to Sidney," Hughes said during the morning's hearing on his bill.
"A lot of people from Lincoln or Omaha think, 'Oh, that's too far, I can't go that far.' Well, it's the same distance. And we've got very good roads."
The state government owns Game and Parks' two-building Lincoln complex. The buildings are physically linked, McCoy said, and one was built with federal funds that would have to be repaid if it were totally vacated.
During the hearing on Erdman's bill, McCoy came under fire for estimates in the bills' fiscal notes that relocating from Lincoln would cost $11.5 million to $14.4 million in annual rent.
Columbus Sen. Mike Moser noted the Sidney trio's estimate that rent for the Cabela's office buildings would be far below the monthly range of $16 to $20 per square foot listed in the bills' fiscal notes.
"We want to believe our agencies when they come (to) testify before the Legislature," he told McCoy. But "when you come in with a rental (figure) that's 10 times higher than it probably would be, it kind of calls into question everything you say."
McCoy countered that the Nebraska Department of Administrative Services had provided the rental estimates put in LB 562's and LB 668's fiscal notes. They were based on a need for 60,000 square feet, he said.
But when he returned to testify against Hughes' bill, he apologized because his staff had learned in between hearings that the $16- to $20-per-square-foot estimate was supposed to be a per-year figure — not a per-month one.
"I do not like saying this: You were right. There was a screwup," McCoy told Moser. "It's 12 times higher than it should be."
That would slash Game and Parks' estimated rent outside Lincoln to between $960,000 and $1.2 million a year. Most of the agency's budget is funded by user fees, McCoy said.

By Todd von Kampen

AP: Missouri River to remain low headed into spring flood season

OMAHA — The amount of water being released into the Missouri River from a key dam on the Nebraska-South Dakota border will likely remain low this month because conditions remain dry and snowpack levels are below average throughout the region.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Thursday that it will keep the amount of water flowing out of Gavins Point Dam at the winter release rate of 17,000 cubic feet per second. That means river levels will remain low headed into spring.

Officials say it still appears that 2021 will be somewhat drier and only about 89% of the normal amount of water is expected to flow down the Missouri River. The Corps now estimates that 22.9 million acre feet of water will flow down the river this year. That is below the average of 25.8 million acre feet. Currently, less than 80% of the normal level of snow is in the mountains that feed into the Missouri River.

The Corps' John Remus said the system of reservoirs along the river is in good shape to handle runoff this year while still providing enough water for navigation starting in April and for other uses of the river.

NET: 'Take Their Business And Bring It Into Nebraska': Ho-Chunk Inc. CEO Says New Casinos Will Get Winnebago Tribe On The Right Financial Path

The legalization of casino gambling in Nebraska will help the Winnebago Tribe contend and bring back lost revenue from competing Iowa casinos, the tribe's lead economic developer said.

"We've been watching somebody eat our lunch for 20 years and not care about us," Ho-Chunk Inc. CEO Lance Morgan said on NET' News' Speaking of Nebraska.

The Winnebago Tribe already owns the WinnaVegas Casino in Sloan, Iowa, which is located just across the Missouri River from Winnebago, Nebraska. The casino -- operated by Ho-Chunk Inc., the economic development arm of the tribe -- opened in 1992.

The casino flourished right away, but hasn't been as profitable after Iowa expanded gambling later in the decade, Morgan said. With the new casino business eminent in the coming years, following Nebraska voters passing three initiatives last November, Morgan said the added revenue will help put the Winnebago Tribe on the right financial path.

“We believe in coming full circle," he said. "We're back, and now, we are going to take their business and bring it into Nebraska."

Under the passed initiatives, casinos in Nebraska must coexist with a horse racing track. Ho-Chunk has announced it will build casinos at the horse race tracks in South Sioux City, Omaha and Lincoln. The Columbus race track is determining plans for a casino, and there's is a potential developer in North Platte, according to the North Platte Area Chamber of Commerce. It is unclear if the race track in Hastings has plans for a casino.

Fonner Park in Grand Island will also build a casino, but who operates it is yet to be determined, said Chris Kotulak, Fonner Park CEO. "We're just trying to do the best thing for Fonner Park, Grand Island and central Nebraska," he said.

By Will Bauer

OWH Editorial: Dodge County attorney situation should prod Legislature to consider law change

The ongoing series of troubling actions by Dodge County Attorney Oliver Glass raises a question of

statewide import: Should Nebraska lawmakers set some sort of automatic punishment when an elected official crosses a threshold of lawbreaking?

Perhaps the state, for example, could establish an automatic recall vote when officials cross a defined line. Or an automatic prohibition against seeking reelection. Some situations might merit automatic removal from office.

At present, Nebraska law contains no such required punishment. But when an elected official indulges in repeated violations of the law, to the point of facing a jail sentence, consideration of some type of automatic penalty is worthy of serious consideration by lawmakers.

The string of actions by Dodge County Attorney Oliver Glass provides a major example. Glass last week violated his DUI probation. He spent the weekend in the same jail with offenders he normally prosecutes. Violating probation in Nebraska usually results in jail time: The prospect of a county attorney sitting in incarceration — while the deputy county attorney once again subs for him in court due to Glass's troubles — is a concerning circumstance.

Perhaps Glass will resign. But if not, this situation calls for review of election law.

Glass suffers from a major alcohol problem, as his own attorney acknowledges. Such an addiction, no question, is a terrible burden, for the alcoholic and others affected by his actions. The condition deserves understanding and treatment. But there also comes a point when the individual's repeated disregard for responsible behavior warrants a strong response.

In January 2020, a routine probation test found alcohol in Glass' system. Two months later, he was arrested for DUI. In that incident, a 911 caller following Glass reported that he was driving slowly, swerving and hitting curbs on a road on the edge of Fremont. In August, a judge placed him on 15 months' probation and ordered him to abstain from alcohol. That is the probation Glass violated last week after he reportedly showed up drunk to pick up his children for his parenting time.

Dodge County residents are also familiar with Glass's run-ins with Nathan Schany, a Fremont man who dated Glass's estranged wife. In March, an inebriated Glass allegedly fired off a long series of abusive messages at Schany via 10 phone calls and 46 texts. Glass referred to a character in the hit series "Breaking Bad" getting his head blown off and suggested that he could get all kinds of drugs for Schany. After Schany drunkenly took an Adderall pill in the wake of that incident and made suicidal comments, he was hospitalized for six days, finding himself repeatedly without sensible recourse for release. Schany and his attorney questioned whether Glass had a hand in his hospitalization and his termination from a job as a delivery driver. Glass adamantly denies both accusations.

Glass was appointed as Dodge County's top prosecutor in 2011. He was elected in 2014 and reelected in 2018.

Voters in Nebraska have the option, under state law, to recall local elected officials such as the county attorney. In fact, Nebraska law could not be looser on this question: No specific grounds are required for mounting a recall.

Should Nebraska law really be so lax as to allow local elected officials to repeatedly violate the law — to the point the official faces a jail sentence — and stay in office or without a penalty barring his reelection? It's a serious question the Legislature must face given what's happened in Dodge County.

OWH Midlands Voices: Legislature strengthened protection orders but now there's more to do

One in four domestic violence survivors report experiencing five or more years of abuse. I am one in four. For years, my father verbally and physically abused me and my mother. By July 2018, the abuse escalated, and my mother and I were scared for our lives. She sought help through legal action and applied for a domestic abuse protection order. She outlined our worst fears — deadly violence, including

the threat of burning down the house. Without any opportunity to state our case before a judge, the court turned us away and the protection order was denied outright.
And then, in February 2019 — just months later — those long-held fears became our nightmarish reality. Our abuser set our house on fire and nearly killed us. We were lucky there was snow on the ground to help put out the flames on my mother's body, otherwise, she probably would not be here today! Now, almost two years later, we are still recovering.
My mother is now permanently disabled, has a tracheotomy, scaring and disfiguring over three quarters of her body. My mother had to learn how to try to talk and walk again. She has several weekly appointments and 10 specialist doctors for her recovery. More than once I thought I was going to lose my best friend, my Mother! Now, I take care of her as she waits for more surgeries to help her talk and walk better. In total, my mother has made it through almost 100 surgeries from this attack.
I have since recovered with some disfigurement and scaring. I received my CNA, CMA, with CPR training to help care for my mother. We currently have a Go Fund Me page set up, as we're now trying to get my mother a walk-in tub to make it easier for her to bathe.
While this was playing out, advocates and policymakers were already at work to make it so no one would be denied the protection they requested and knew they needed. As my mother laid in a hospital bed fighting for her life and undergoing operation after operation, state senators debated whether these cries for help deserved to be heard or whether protection order requests make too much work for the court system.
Ultimately, the legislation passed, thanks to champions in the Legislature like State Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh, who introduced the legislation, and State Sen. Robert Hilkemann, who made it his priority bill for the session. By summer 2019, Legislative Bill 532 was signed into law making it clear that protection orders could no longer be denied outright, as ours was. And in 2020, virtually no domestic violence protection orders were denied outright. The law worked for survivors in Douglas County!
Now, advocates are back at work to pass LB 118, introduced by State Sen.Adam Morfeld, to remove additional barriers that can make seeking a protection order challenging for those experiencing abuse. As I know too well, the most dangerous time for someone experiencing domestic violence is when the abuser feels a loss of power of control and the victims are trying to leave. As a community, we must put in place options for people to safely leave their abuser. Strengthening protection orders and extending the time they are in place would mean survivors no longer have to reapply for protection and go through the burden of the reapplication process. This new bill would be easier and more effective for those asking for help.
Courts can no longer ignore survivors in the quest for protection, but there is more work to be done, and I refuse to be silenced again if it can help even just one person to avoid the pain and suffering my family continues to go through. I am one in four. There are more, and they deserve your support through the passage of LB 118.
Amanda Bohm lives in Omaha.

OWH: They're to be prized

Thank you, Omaha World-Herald for holding the Nebraska Legislature, Nebraska HHS and St. Francis Ministries' feet to the fire over the miserable contract failure leaving needy children, families and other small agencies in even more uncertainty. My former boss, the late Rev. Val Peter of Boys Town, was oft-quoted saying "children are to be prized, not priced." Seemingly this isn't part of contract criteria anymore.
Now, taxpayers have a gun to their collective heads to save incompetence, and kids who are set up to fail are even more at risk.

John Melingagio, Omaha

OWH: Failure

How dare Dannette Smith, CEO of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services state, "The Department has never wavered from doing what's right for children and families in Nebraska" (OWH Jan. 30). You did wrong the minute the contract was signed with St. Francis Ministries! A bid of 60% less than others didn't ring any bells that something was wrong? Did she never hear the adage, "You get what you pay for," And now Nebraska has signed on to dump more money down a rat hole and it will end up being more costly than the other bids were.

The taxpayers are only one of the losers in this fiasco. The real losers are the the children and families that Nebraska DHSS were supposed to care for and protect. They have failed miserably.

Lois Hurd, Grinnell, Iowa

LJS Editorial, 2/5: Legislature must also green light sports bets

Gambling won big at the polls in November, with nearly two-thirds of Nebraska voters approving the initiatives to legalize casinos at horse tracks across the state.

As the Nebraska Legislature sets up the regulations for Nebraska's first casinos, lawmakers would be remiss to ignore sports betting as a logical extension of the stated goal for gambling revenues: property tax relief.

Among the handful of gambling-related proposals heard by a legislative committee Monday were two plans – one bill simply requiring senators' approval, the other a constitutional amendment that would need a green light from voters – that would authorize sports wagering in the state.

Whichever plan lawmakers deem best must advance out of committee and through the full Legislature.

Proponents of the successful ballot initiatives hammered home two related points to Nebraska voters: Nebraskans were paying other states' taxes for them, and money kept within the state could be used to reduce the high property tax burden as a result of the state's insufficient investment in K-12 education.

Indeed, Nebraskans have sent untold billions of dollars across the border to legalized casinos in every neighboring state but Wyoming. Sports gambling provides another – and rapidly growing – option to help retain that money, 70% of which will be directed to property tax relief.

Following the Supreme Court's 2018 ruling that permitted the sports wagering nationwide, only Colorado and Iowa have implemented it. South Dakota voters also approved the practice in an initiative in November, but its legislature hasn't yet passed the needed regulations.

This means Nebraska has a chance to get ahead of the curve in the Midwest and join the roughly half of states with legalized, regulated sports wagering – a category saw that record growth in 2020 – including those in which Nebraskans already gamble.

Nearly 20% of the state tax revenue generated by Iowa sports wagering came from casinos within sight of Omaha's skyline. And the casino that produced the lion's share of that money did so without offering mobile betting, which raked in nearly three-quarters of the handle accepted by the 19 state-sanctioned casinos.

This is money, collected strictly on a voluntary basis from bettors, Nebraska must fight to keep.

It's not yet clear what kind of long-term budget shortfall Nebraska will face as a result of COVID-19, but providing tax relief and providing more adequate state aid to public schools – these are inextricably intertwined – will be key to ensuring the intentions of the voter-approved initiative are met.

And new revenues from casinos will serve an integral role toward meeting these two goals, each of which is championed by different sides of the aisle.

Accordingly, the Nebraska Legislature must ensure it can meet both aims as it wades into these uncharted waters – and sports wagering offers another revenue stream that can't be ignored.

LJS Local View: Secret ballots are unconstitutional

"The salvation of the state is watchfulness of the citizen," says the inscription carved above the north doors to the Nebraska state Capitol. It is difficult for the citizens to be watchful of votes taken in secret.
Recently, senators had the opportunity to vote on a rule change designed to hold legislators accountable to both our Nebraska Constitution and our voters, but it failed miserably (30-19) in our one-house Legislature. The proposed rule change called for a transparent, roll call vote for the Legislature's Officers and Committee Chairpersons, instead of the current "secret ballot" vote.
The Journal Star's recent editorial ("Secret ballots for committee chairs vital for independence," Jan. 29) concluded that the Nebraska's voters' right to open transparency in all votes is trumped by a majority of the legislators' desire for secrecy. This editorial conveniently left out the fact that by holding a secret vote, the Nebraska State Legislature is in violation of our State Constitution.
Specifically, Article III, Section 11 of the Nebraska Constitution, declares that "the yeas and nays of the members shall at the desire of any one of them be entered into the journal." In other words, whenever any Senator calls for a recorded public vote, it happens, for all to see.
Every other vote that the Legislature takes, thankfully, is open and transparent to the public, except for these crucial votes on officers and chairpersons of committees. All duly elected senators to the Nebraska Legislature are required to take an oath to uphold our U.S. Constitution and to uphold our Nebraska State Constitution.
Seems like a reasonable requirement for any publicly elected officer, but currently senators are violating that oath by allowing the secret voting to continue.
Instead of addressing the issue of our Legislature not complying with our Constitution, a handful of senators distracted the debate on this rule change by intimating that the proposed rule change was somehow a conspiracy to "dismantle this Unicameral." They avoided the Constitutional question by suggesting that this was somehow going to destroy our "officially nonpartisan structure."
On its face, that argument is patently absurd. Having open, transparent votes on leadership positions will do nothing but strengthen the public trust in the Unicameral.
In Nebraska, George Norris is remembered as the father of Nebraska's unicameral. Reviewing historical articles about Senator Norris, he repeatedly described secrecy as "the greatest evil of the two-house legislature." Norris said that all business would be conducted in the open in a unicameral. His principle of openness is being violated in the Unicameral by secret votes for officers and chairpersons.
If the majority of Legislators desire to have secret votes be constitutional, they should propose a constitutional amendment and let voters decide if they prefer secrecy over transparency.
Sen. Steve Halloran represents District 33 (Adams County and part of Hall County) in the Nebraska Legislature. He lives in Hastings.

LJS: Sasse says he'll put the Constitution ahead of party politics as state GOP considers censure

As the Nebraska Republican state central committee prepares to consider a motion to censure Sen. Ben Sasse next week, the GOP senator posted a video Thursday stating that he pledged from the beginning to "put the Constitution ahead of party politics" and said he will continue to do so.
"My disagreements with President (Donald) Trump have never been personal — they've always been about my genuine affection for the constitutional order, something every American regardless of party

should share," Sasse said.
While Sasse has not stated whether he would be willing to pledge that he would not vote to convict Trump following a Senate trial, the senator has said that the president was "derelict in his duty to defend the Constitution and uphold the rule of law" during last month's insurrection at the Capitol.
Sasse has said the former president "has consistently lied by claiming that he 'won the election by a landslide' while promoting conspiracy theories."
That criticism has been enough to stir several GOP county organizations to seek a vote to censure Sasse at the GOP state gathering in Columbus on Feb. 13.
The GOP in Scotts Bluff County, in advocating for censure, sent an open letter to Sasse, calling his actions in criticizing Trump "a selfish, political ploy."
“Sasse has a record of bashing President Trump,” Kolene Woodward, chair of the Scotts Bluff County GOP, told the Scottsbluff Star-Herald. “Well, in the movement, Trump didn’t find us; we found him. We found a voice for our political views, and someone who would actually advance that voice, and Sasse is going completely against that.
"No matter what Trump does or whatever, going forward, there are 75 million people who want that voice to continue. Him (Sasse) not representing that is kind of our problem."
Sasse, in a video posting on YouTube, acknowledged that the anger within the state party rests solely on "me not bending the knee to" Trump.
The former president won 58% of the vote in Nebraska but carried 87 of the state's 93 counties with at least 67% support.
"As a friend and fellow Republican," Sasse said in a video, "I want to shoot straight: I'm not gonna spend any time trying to talk you out of another censure."
In 2016, the Nebraska Republican Party censured Sasse for not being supportive enough of Trump.
But four years later, Sasse won a GOP primary contest with a record high vote and then repeated that success in the general election by receiving more votes than any candidate in Nebraska history.
"We still agree on some big things," Sasse said in his video. "Rule of law, constitutionalism, limited government, unlimited human potential, extending the American dream to more of our brothers and sisters.
"We can lead" again, Sasse said, "but only if our party is willing to change."
By Don Walton

OWH: Some in Nebraska GOP want to censure Sasse; he slams 'weird worship' of Trump

Some Nebraska Republicans are angry enough at Sen. Ben Sasse that they want to formally censure, or rebuke, him.
Sasse has been one of the few Republicans in a national elected position to harshly criticize former President Donald Trump.
At least two proposals have come from party officials in western Nebraska to censure Sasse on Feb. 13 at the Republican State Central Committee meeting in Columbus. Other proposals have come from individuals.
In a video statement issued Thursday evening, Sasse said the “anger” in the Nebraska Republican Party has never been about him “violating principle or abandoning conservative policy.”
“I’m one of the most conservative voters in the Senate — the anger’s always been simply about me not bending the knee to ... one guy,” said Sasse, who won reelection in November.
“Jan. 6 is gonna leave a scar. For 220 years, one of the most beautiful things about America has been our peaceful transfer of power,” Sasse said. “But what Americans saw three weeks ago was ugly — shameful mob violence to disrupt a constitutionally mandated meeting of Congress to affirm that peaceful transfer

of power."
Sasse, in a high-turnout election last fall, set a record for the number of votes received by a federal office-seeker in Nebraska, lapping his closest competitor, Omaha baker Chris Janicek, a Democrat. Sasse did this despite being heard on an audio clip sharply criticizing Trump.
Hitchcock County Republican leader Bruce Desautels wrote in a 13-point resolution that the remarks and actions of Sasse over at least several months deserve censure by the Central Committee.
The Scotts Bluff County Republican Party has also submitted such a proposal to the central committee, said Ryan Hamilton, executive director of the Nebraska GOP. Eight of 156 committee members have also submitted their own proposals, Hamilton said.
Sasse said that "something has definitely changed over the last four years," but that it isn't him.
"Personality cults aren't conservative, conspiracy theories aren't conservative, lying that an election has been stolen isn't conservative, acting like politics is a religion isn't conservative," he said.
Hamilton said the state party office has been deluged by hundreds and even "thousands" of phone calls, texts, emails and Facebook messages expressing frustration with Sasse.
Dan Welch of Omaha, chairman of the Nebraska GOP, said that if there are numerous proposals to censure Sasse, they will probably be consolidated into one and then debated at the meeting.
"I don't know how I'm going to vote," he said.
Welch said negative comments and votes made by Sasse, and the fact that some came right before the election, disappointed him.
Hamilton said Sasse has been invited to the meeting in Columbus. A Sasse spokesman said Trump's impeachment trial is expected to run through that date, which would make appearing at the meeting "very difficult."
Among other things, the Hitchcock County resolution says Sasse rejected the notion that impeaching a private citizen is unconstitutional; accused Trump of inciting a riot at the U.S. Capitol; said Trump has lied to the American people and that lies have consequences; said Trump mistreats women, dallies with white supremacy, secretly mocks evangelicals and "kisses dictators' butts;" and is "indifferent" to voter fraud claims made by Trump and followers.
Sasse said the state party can censure him again, as happened in May 2016 for not being "supportive enough of Donald Trump," but it needs to be clear about why.
"It's because I still believe (as you used to) that politics is not about the weird worship of one dude," Sasse said. "The party could purge Trump-skeptics, but I'd like to convince you that not only is this 'civic cancer' for the nation, but it's also terrible for our party."
By Rick Ruggles and Jessica Wade

AP: Biden team pitches US on big virus aid as Senate starts work

WASHINGTON (AP) — As senators launched an all-night session Thursday to lay groundwork for President Joe Biden's $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, the White House is increasingly focused on selling the plan directly to voters.
Biden's administration has done 60-plus interviews with national TV and radio shows. There have been spots on local TV news and briefings last week with more than 50 groups, including General Motors, Meals on Wheels America and Planned Parenthood. One of the main goals is to stop people from getting bogged down in the tangle of partisan deal-making and convince them that every penny of the "go big" package is needed.
"The public is not getting caught up in process — what they want is results," said Cedric Richmond, the White House director of public engagement. "People these days are not worried about the inside-the-Beltway terminology. They're looking at who's doing what to help."

The president told Democratic lawmakers that he views the package's proposal for $1,400 direct payments to individuals as a foundational promise to voters. It represents a strategic bet by the White House that voters will suspend their partisan beliefs to evaluate the plan and support its massive scope.
Biden has suggested he may be flexible on the $1.9 trillion topline figure for the plan and on ways to more narrowly target who gets direct payments. But the $1,400 amount — on top of $600 in payments approved in December — appears to be nonnegotiable.
"I'm not going to start my administration by breaking a promise to the American people," he said.
On Capitol Hill, Democrats were on track Thursday to approve a budget resolution that will pave the way for eventually passing the aid package on a party-line vote by Democrats, with or without bipartisan support from Republicans.
Senators were poised for an all-night session to consider amendments that could define the contours of the eventual bill. One from Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Susan Collins, R-Maine, would prevent "upper-income" taxpayers from qualifying for Biden's proposed $1,400 direct payments and it passed 99-1. No income level was specified.
Vice President Kamala Harris was in attendance, able to cast a tie-breaking vote, if needed, in the chamber that is evenly divided 50-50. A White House aide said the goal is to provide an open and bipartisan debate.
The goal is approval by March deadlines for expiring jobless benefits and other aid.
The Biden package comes after $4 trillion in rescue spending that cushioned the financial blow from the pandemic but did little to stop the disease. It includes politically divisive provisions such as a $15 hourly minimum wage and $350 billion in aid for state and local governments. Ten Republican senators countered with a $618 billion package, one-third of what Biden is offering.
Biden entered the presidency with Americans generally hopeful about his ability to fight the pandemic and guide the economy. About three-quarters said they have at least some confidence in his ability to handle the coronavirus, while roughly two-thirds had at least some confidence in his economic leadership, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.
Most Americans still see the need for government stimulus. A survey released Wednesday by Quinnipiac University found 68% of U.S. adults support Biden's stimulus package and 24% oppose it. But Republicans are divided on the measure, with 47% opposed and 37% favoring it. Nearly all Democrats backed the plan.
Based on his interactions, Richmond sees these elements of the package as the most popular: the direct payments, the $160 billion for widespread vaccinations, food and nutrition assistance for struggling Americans, and the push to halve the child poverty rate through tax credits and other benefits.
But even Republicans who are supportive of some kind of aid are telling their voters Biden's plan is too expensive — and it's possible people could be turned off if they think stimulus dollars are being wasted.
The group of GOP senators behind the counterproposal told Biden in a letter Thursday that they had significant questions about the "size and scope" of his plan given how much Congress already has allocated and the more than $60 billion in emergency assistance they said states and districts have yet to spend on public schools.
Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, told KUTV in Salt Lake City that aid to state and local governments, a particular sticking point for Republicans, should be based on "actual need, as opposed to a simple blanket payment of billions of dollars, which in many cases would represent a windfall." But Romney also stepped toward bipartisanship Thursday by proposing payments of at least $3,000 per child to families, though they would be paid for in part by cutting other government programs and tax credits that are targeted toward families.
Republicans are betting Biden will pay a price politically if he doesn't take a bipartisan tack. By contrast, Democrats hope Republicans will pay a price if voters don't see them engaging with the fullness of the

crisis.
The White House can point to at least one Republican who considers Biden's plan essential: Jeff Williams, the mayor of Arlington, Texas. Williams knows there could be a partisan backlash to supporting Biden's plan. But, on the merits, the term-limited mayor sees no alternative.
The city is gearing up for property tax assessments, and estimates are that revenues could drop 10%, largely because commercial real estate has taken a severe hit as offices, restaurants and hotels have emptied. Williams said he believes Republicans ultimately want to help, too, even if they choke on the high price tag.
"It's the right thing to do," he said. "The gist of this is that you always have those extremists that are there, but most of our Republicans have been supportive of getting fiscal assistance to cities. They can't come up with that dollar amount."
The United States has lost roughly 10 million jobs because of the pandemic, and the Congressional Budget Office estimates that without additional aid, the jobs won't return in full until 2024. The Census Bureau estimates 1 in 8 households with children lacks sufficient food.
But the picture is also complicated. The Penn Wharton Budget Model found in a report released Wednesday that 73% of the $1,400 stimulus checks would go into savings, meaning there would be limited growth in consumer spending, which helps propel the economy.

AP: J&J asks US regulators to OK its one-shot COVID-19 vaccine

Johnson & Johnson asked U.S. regulators Thursday to clear the world's first single-dose COVID-19 vaccine, an easier-to-use option that could boost scarce supplies.
J&J's vaccine was safe and offered strong protection against moderate to severe COVID-19, according to preliminary results from a massive international study.
It didn't appear quite as strong as two-dose competitors made by Pfizer and Moderna -- a finding that may be more perception than reality, given differences in how each was tested.
But the Food and Drug Administration is asking its independent advisers to publicly debate all the data behind the single-dose shot -- just like its competitors were put under the microscope -- before it decides whether to green light a third vaccine option in the U.S. The panel will meet Feb. 26.
Dr. Peter Marks, FDA's vaccine chief, has cautioned against making comparisons before the evidence is all in.
"With so much need to get this pandemic under control, I think we can't ignore any tool in the tool chest," he told the American Medical Association last week. "We will have to do our best to try to make sure that we find the populations that benefit the most from each of these vaccines and deploy them in a very thoughtful manner."
WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW
Overall, the single-dose vaccine was 66% effective at preventing moderate to severe COVID-19, according to early findings from a study of 44,000 people in the U.S., Latin America and South Africa.
But it was 85% protective against the most serious symptoms — and starting 28 days after their shot, researchers found no one who got the vaccine needed hospitalization or died.
WEAKER BUT STILL FIGHTS MUTATING VIRUS
The one-dose option worked better in the U.S. — 72% effective against moderate to severe COVID-19 — compared with 66% in Latin America and 57% in South Africa, where a more contagious mutant virus is spreading.
Scientists have been looking for real-world evidence about how vaccines work as the world races to stay ahead of the rapidly mutating virus, and welcomed the news that the J&J option — while weaker — did still offer protection.

OTHER OPTIONS

In large U.S. studies, two doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines proved 95% protective against any symptomatic COVID-19.

But those studies were finished before the record virus surges of recent months and the appearance of the worrisome mutants, meaning such testing might not turn out the same if repeated today.

J&J also is studying a two-dose version of its vaccine, but results won't be available for several more months.

THE SUPPLY

J&J said it would have some vaccine ready to ship if the FDA allows emergency use of the shot, but it didn't reveal how much. The pharmaceutical giant said it expects to supply 100 million doses to the U.S. by the end of June.

It expects to file a similar application with European regulators soon.

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