From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 8-17-20
Date: Monday, August 17, 2020 9:17:19 AM
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Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Aug 2020	3.08	-20.00	09:06
Corn	Dec 2020	3.01	-41.00	09:06
Milo	Aug 2020	3.31	3.00	09:06
Milo	Dec 2020	3.45	3.00	09:06
Soybeans	Aug 2020	8.24	-85.00	09:06
Soybeans	Dec 2020	8.29	-80.00	09:06
Wheat	Aug 2020	3.89	-44.00	09:06
Wheat	Jul 2021	3.87	-80.00	09:06

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KMTV: Supporters of anti-hair discrimination bill confused by veto
KETV: Advocates push for anti-discrimination bill after Gov. Ricketts vetoes it
KETV: Governor Ricketts signs bill banning dismemberment abortion, vetoes natural hair discrimination bill
NET: Birx Says Nebraska's Coronavirus Situation Improving, But Caution Still Needed
KLKN: A White House official visits Capitol, approves of mask mandate
WOWT: Dr. Birx: Containing community spread of COVID-19 among asymptomatic groups key for Nebraska
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OWH: Gov. Ricketts vetoes natural hair discrimination bill, signs abortion bill

LINCOLN — Gov. Pete Ricketts, during a rally Saturday, signed into law a bill banning a method of second-trimester abortion in Nebraska. He also announced that he vetoed a bill that would ban discrimination against Black people based on their naturally curly hair.
One supporter of the hair bill said she was disappointed and suspicious of the veto of Legislative Bill

1060.
“It seems like a cop-out to what the real issue is,” said Ashlei Spivey of Omaha, the founder and director of the group I Be Black Girl, which seeks to help Black women and girls reach their full potential.
Spivey was one of several Black women who supported LB 1060, which sought to expand the definition of race to protect people from discrimination in the workplace when they wear their hair in natural styles.
Ricketts, in his veto message, said that he agreed with the goal of the bill but that some hairstyles, such as locks, braids and twists, are not exclusively worn by one race. He also said the bill would hinder employers from enacting grooming standards related to safety, such as precautions needed for food handlers or machinery operators.
The governor said he would work with supporters of LB 1060 to amend the bill and get it passed next year because “clearly” Black people and others should not be discriminated against in the workplace for their natural hair.
Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha, who made the bill her priority for the session, said it was unfortunate that Ricketts never communicated his concerns about the bill. She said she worked with the Nebraska Attorney General’s Office and others to amend the bill,and felt that the governor’s concerns had already been addressed.
Cavanaugh, a Democrat, clashed with the Republican governor on other issues this year, including the state’s COVID-19 testing program.
Spivey said that after she stopped chemically straightening her hair and let it grow out naturally curly and kinky, she lost her job. Her employer asked, “When are you going to get your other hair back?” she said. Spivey said she was also told that it was “intimidating” when she wore her hair in braids and twists. Other women related similar stories during a public hearing on the bill in February.
“This is a time when Nebraska workplaces need to be more inclusive,” Spivey said. At least six other states have adopted similar laws.
Because LB 1060 was vetoed after the 2020 session adjourned, senators don’t have an opportunity to try to override the veto.
Ricketts was joined by members of several groups that oppose abortion, including the Nebraska Catholic Conference, the Nebraska Family Alliance and Nebraska Right to Life, for a rally at the State Capitol.
The groups gathered for the governor’s signing of LB 814, which prohibits an abortion method called dilation and evacuation. The procedure involves dilating a woman’s cervix and removing the fetus in pieces. Abortion opponents call the procedure dismemberment abortion.
LB 814’s opponents said they will be exploring potential legal challenges during the three months before the bill takes effect.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: Ricketts vetoes racial discrimination bill

Gov. Pete Ricketts handed out a veto Saturday that can't be subject to an override attempt, since the Legislature is out of session.
Ricketts vetoed a bill (LB1060) that would add to the definition of race in the Nebraska Fair Employment Practice Act. It says: Race includes, but is not limited to, hair texture and protective hairstyles; and protective hairstyles includes, but is not limited to hairstyles such as braids, locks, and twists.
Black women have said that in some workplaces, to be accepted, they are expected to wear their hair more like people with naturally straight hair, said Omaha Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh, who introduced the bill. But getting their hair to look like that involves heat and chemical straightening that can cause damage and health concerns.

One woman testified at a hearing for the bill that when her son applied for a job in Sarpy County, he was told he did a good interview and had good credentials, but to continue in the job process he would need to cut his dreadlocks.
Ricketts said the new definition of race would apply in all discrimination cases under the act, and covers features based on mutable characteristics that can't be attributed to one racial group. Hairstyles are easily changed, he said, and those included in the bill — locks, braids and twists — are not exclusively worn by one race.
"While I agree with the goal, I object to the form of the bill," he said. "It needs to add protections for employees based upon their immutable hair texture and to also add protections for employers centered on health and safety standards."
Employers would be unable to uniformly apply their grooming policies without fear of violating the fair employment act, he said. And since the changes would apply to state agencies and political subdivisions, it would preclude law enforcement from being able to maintain longstanding personal grooming policies.
"I am deeply disappointed by Gov. Rickett's decision to veto my priority bill," Cavanaugh said. "This bill had 15 testifiers in support and none in opposition, no cost to the state, and created important protections for women of color in the workplace. It is unfortunate that the governor and his office never reached out with any of his concerns."
Ricketts said there is a need to provide protections for African Americans and others so their unchangeable hair textures cannot be used as a reason for workplace bias or discrimination.
He is committed to working with the Legislature early in the 2021 session to achieve that, he said, but in the manner he has put forth.
By JoAnne Young

KLKN: Governor Ricketts vetoes bill that would ban hair discrimination

LINCOLN, Neb. (KMTV) —Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts announced his veto of LB 1060 on Saturday — a bill that would ban racial discrimination based on protective hairstyles and natural hair textures in the workplace.
On Aug. 11, the bill passed on Final Reading in the Nebraska Legislature; however, lawmakers aren't able to try overriding the governor's decision as the Legislature is no longer in session.
Gov. Ricketts said in a statement that he agrees with the intent of the bill, but believes that it would add a new definition of "race" that would apply in all discrimination cases that come up under the Nebraska Fair Employment Practice Act.
"The bill covers features based on mutable characteristics that are not attributable to one racial group. While hair type is an immutable characteristic, hairstyles can easily be changed. Additionally, the hairstyles named in the bill (locks, braids, and twists) are not exclusively worn by one race," Gov. Ricketts said in the statement.
The governor said he agrees with the goal of the bill, but that it "needs to add protections for employees based upon their immutable hair texture and to also add protections for employers centered on health and safety standards."
He added that he's committed to working with the Legislature early in the upcoming session to enact a statute that will achieve the purpose of the bill in a way that focuses on "immutable race characteristics" while providing employer flexibility.
Ashlei Spivey, Founder of I Be Black Girl and Equity and Inclusion Officer on the ACLU of Nebraska Board of Directors issued the following statement following the announcement:
"Racial discrimination in all forms is wrong and it's deeply disappointing that natural hair discrimination will remain legal in Nebraska because of the governor's veto. The bill was supported by the business

community, vetted by both the Attorney General's office and the Nebraska Equal Opportunity Commission, and most importantly led by Black Nebraska women. It was a commonsense update to our state workplace civil rights laws. The need for this protection is urgent and we hope the governor makes every effort to mitigate the harm of discrimination in the coming months until the bill can be revisited and passed into law. Above all else, this is a missed opportunity to demonstrate a clear commitment to making our workplaces more inclusive and safer for all Nebraskans. Everyone should consider that a loss."

Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh, who sponsored the bill, said the following in a statement:

"I am deeply disappointed by Governor Rickett's decision to veto my priority bill. I worked with many community stakeholders, the NEOC, and the Attorney General's office to ensure that the intent of the bill was fully realized. This bill had 15 testifiers in support and none in opposition, no cost to the state, and created important protections for women of color in the workplace. It is unfortunate that the Governor and his office never reached out with any of his concerns. The concerns outlined in the Governor's letter about LB1060 were addressed in the committee hearing and again on the floor of the legislature after several hours of debate."

Read Gov. Ricketts' full statement on the decision below.

Dear Mr. President and Members of the Legislature:

I am returning LB 1060 without my signature and with my objections. I agree with the intent of LB 1060 to protect people against racial discrimination.

LB 1060 would add a new definition of "race" that would apply in all discrimination cases arising under the Nebraska Fair Employment Practice Act. The new definition would state "race includes, but is not limited to, hair texture and protective hairstyles; and protective hairstyles includes, but is not limited to, hairstyles such as braids, locks, and twists."

The bill covers features based on mutable characteristics that are not attributable to one racial group. While hair type is an immutable characteristic, hairstyles can easily be changed. Additionally, the hairstyles named in the bill (locks, braids, and twists) are not exclusively worn by one race.

While I agree with the goal, I object to the form of the bill. It needs to add protections for employees based upon their immutable hair texture and to also add protections for employers centered on health and safety standards.

As written, the bill fails to provide health or safety exceptions for employers. For example, employees who work in food service or around heavy machinery are often required to wear their hair a certain length or tie back or cover their hair in order to ensure their safety, as well as the health and safety of the public.

Under LB 1060, an employer would be unable to uniformly apply its grooming policies without fear of violating the Nebraska Fair Employment Practice Act. Additionally, since the changes in LB 1060 will apply to state agencies and political subdivisions, it will preclude law enforcement agencies across the state from being able to maintain long-standing personal grooming policies.

Clearly, there is a need to provide appropriate protections for African Americans and others so that their unchangeable hair textures cannot be used as a reason for bias or discrimination in the workplace. I am committed to working with the Legislature to enact a statute early in the upcoming session that will achieve this important purpose but in a manner that focuses on immutable race characteristics and provides employer flexibility.

For these reasons, I vetoed LB 1060. Given that the Legislature has adjourned sine die, I filed the vetoed bill with the Nebraska Secretary of State.

Sincerely,

Pete Ricketts

Governor

By Macy Meyer

LJS: Governor holds anti-abortion bill signing on steps of Capitol

Gov. Pete Ricketts signed an anti-abortion bill Saturday on the steps of the Capitol, giving props to eight state senators while a crowd of 200 cheered them on.

Ricketts did the public signing for a bill (LB814) that prohibits a dilation-and-evacuation procedure that the bill calls "dismemberment abortion" on a living fetus. The bill makes it a felony for a medical professional to perform the procedure anywhere in Nebraska, punishable by up to two years in prison and/or a fine of $10,000.

Throughout the signing ceremony, protesters could be heard shouting "murderer" at Ricketts for his financial participation in restoring the death penalty in Nebraska, which the Legislature repealed, through an initiative petition campaign. He also supported the execution of Carey Dean Moore, sentenced to death for killing two Omaha cab drivers. Moore was killed by lethal injection two years ago this month.

Ricketts asked the crowd to lift up in its prayers Julie Schmit-Albin, executive director of Nebraska Right to Life, who could not be there because of ill health. Schmit-Albin sent a note thanking Ricketts and Lincoln Sen. Suzanne Geist on behalf of her organization for their leadership in passing the bill.

"With the assistance of many other pro-life supporters and advocates, you have proven once again that Nebraska is a pro-life state," the note said.

Ricketts said Geist had to get the bill pulled from the Judiciary Committee and then had to overcome filibusters on all three rounds of debate to get it passed.

Geist said she had never seen such an outpouring of support and prayer for a bill since she has been in the Legislature.

"That's what helped us overcome this obstacle and every single obstacle," she said. "That's what strengthened the ... colleagues who were on the fence of whether or not they were going to support this."

Kristen New of Omaha, who worked as a counselor for three years during college and graduate school at two different abortion clinics, also spoke at the bill signing. She said she watched on ultrasound during a D&E abortion a "preborn baby boy experience pain, attempt to fight for his life and ultimately lose."

At the end of the signing ceremony, Ricketts called members of the crowd up onto the Capitol steps for a photo. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder for the picture, many of them without face masks.

At least a dozen protesters stood on the sidewalk below the Capitol steps behind temporary perimeter barriers.

The protesters shouted that Ricketts was a hypocrite for saying he is pro-life but supporting the death penalty. They held signs indicating the way to stop abortions was to hold men accountable for unwanted pregnancies. One sign read, "Ask me how you reverse an erection," referring to a bill passed last year. That bill requires the state Department of Health and Human Services to provide information for women on what to do if they change their minds halfway through a medication abortion. It was referred to as an abortion reversal.

By JoAnne Young

KLKN: Gov. Ricketts signs pro-life bill at a Capitol ceremony

(LINCOLN, Neb.) -People for and against a pro-life bill watched Governor Pete Ricketts sign it Saturday morning on the steps of the Capitol.

"Today is truly a historic day for the pro-life Nebraska," said Gov. Pete Ricketts.

LB 814 was signed into law, banning dismemberment abortions in Nebraska.
As the ceremony filled the steps with pro-lifers, protesters could be heard shouting in disagreement.
"When we regulate women we're treating them as not full human beings and not as people and if that's the case lets regulate men too," said Trish, a protester.
A supporter shares why she attended the signing.
"I'm very joyful and very grateful for the work that they've put into getting it," said Sister Regina Johnson. "I know it was not an easy road for them."
After being debated day after day in the legislature, Senator Suzanne Geist says to it was a tight call and urges voters to research.
"Research if that person that you're supporting is pro-life," said Geist. "Because it would have been one, it would have taken one vote, and this would not happen."
"Anyone who has a pregnancy, the choice of what they do is in between them and their healthcare providers," said Janelle, another protester.
A previous abortion counselor shared why she quit and supports LB 814.
"I watched on ultrasound, a preborn baby boy experience pain, attempt to fight for his life, and ultimately lose," said Kristen New. "It was absolutely horrific, this procedure has no place in a civilized society."
Ricketts's only response to the protesters was this statement.
"Please work to continue to change the hearts of and minds of those who oppose us," said Ricketts.
Protesters told Channel 8 that they will continue to speak out against this law and people for the bill say they will continue to vote for those who support it.
By Jael Pembrick

LifeNews: Nebraska Governor Signs Bill Banning Dismemberment Abortions Tearing Babies Limb From Limb

Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts has signed a bill to protect unborn babies from brutal dismemberment abortions.
The new law prohibits dismemberment abortions, a method typically used in the second trimester to kill nearly fully-formed, living unborn babies. It is a barbaric and dangerous procedure in which the unborn baby is ripped apart in the womb and pulled out in pieces while his or her heart is still beating.
The dismemberment abortion ban embodies model legislation from the National Right to Life Committee that would prohibit "dismemberment abortion," using forceps, clamps, scissors or similar instruments on a living unborn baby to remove him or her from the womb in pieces. Such instruments typically are used in dilation and evacuation (D&E) procedures.
Pro-abortion Democrats blocked the bill previously but lawmakers gave the measure first-round approval on a 34-9 vote after supporters broke through the filibuster. To overcome Democrats' filibuster, the Dismemberment Abortion Ban (LB 814) needed at least 33 votes.
To sign the bill, Governor Pete Ricketts gathered with pro-life leaders on the steps of the State Capitol to sign new pro-life legislation into law.
LB 814 makes it a felony crime to perform a dismemberment abortion anywhere in Nebraska, punishable by up to two years in prison and/or a fine of $10,000.
"Nebraska is a pro-life state, and this week the Legislature took an important step to strengthen our culture of life," said Gov. Ricketts. "Senator Geist's bill bans the horrific procedure of dismemberment abortion, which tears apart a living baby's body limb by limb. This brutal procedure has no place in a humane, civilized society. I commend Sen. Geist, and the bill's supporters in the Unicameral, for outlawing this barbaric practice in Nebraska."

Senator Suzanne Geist of Lincoln introduced the bill.
"As the Senator for the 25th District, I was honored to carry LB 814. This bill passed because a great majority of the Legislative body and a great majority of Nebraska citizens agree with pro-life legislation. I appreciate all who prayed, who contacted their Senators, and all who voted. This is a significant step forward for the pro-life movement," she said.
Julie Schmit-Albin, Executive Director of Nebraska Right to Life, said she was delighted the governor signed the measure.
"Nebraska Right to Life thanks Governor Ricketts and Sen. Geist for their leadership in passing the LB 814 dismemberment abortion ban. With the assistance of many other pro-life supporters and advocates, you have proven once again that Nebraska is a pro-life state," she said.
Karen Bowling, Executive Director for Nebraska Family Alliance, added: "This is a landmark victory for the pro-life movement. Senators had to overcome nearly every procedural hurdle in the book to get here, but 33 Senators affirmed that the unthinkable act of dismembering a live baby in the womb should be abolished. All babies deserve a chance at life, and no living human being should be torn apart limb by limb. LB 814 is based on science and compassion. We are grateful for the tremendous efforts of Senator Geist and all the senators who did the right thing by voting to end dismemberment abortion."
And Marion Miner, Associate Director for Pro-Life and Family for the Nebraska Catholic Conference, said: "We are honored to stand with Governor Ricketts, Senator Geist, elected officials, and other advocates for the unborn from across the state of Nebraska in celebration of LB 814 becoming law. Ending the horrific practice of dismemberment abortion in our state is a significant victory, yet it is just one part of building a Culture of Life in Nebraska which helps provide for the needs of mothers and children, honors a common human dignity, and works to make abortion unnecessary and unthinkable."
When the governor signs the bill, Nebraska will join 12 other states with bans on dismemberment abortions. These states include Kansas, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Kentucky, Ohio, North Dakota, and Indiana.
Meanwhile, pro-abortion Democrats slammed the bill as a waste of time and a violation of women's freedom.
"We aren't truly free unless we can make decisions about our own lives, our own bodies," said state Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha.
Earlier this month, Hunt promised to use every devious trick up her sleeves to fight against the bill, including a filibuster.
"I'm going to pull every shenanigan out of my sleeve to stop this bill. And that might not be something you like but when you play stupid games, you win stupid prizes," she said.
The bill would protect unborn babies from barbaric, torturous deaths, a former abortionist and retired OB-GYN Dr. Kathi Aultman told the state legislature in February, according to the Lincoln Journal Star. Aultman, who later became pro-life, described how she used to abort unborn babies in this way. She said she would drain the amniotic fluid from the womb and then use a clamp to pull the baby's body apart and remove the baby in pieces from the womb, according to the report.
ACTION: Thank the governor by going to https://governor.nebraska.gov/contact-governor
By Steven Ertelt

Christian Post: Nebraska bans dismemberment abortions; procedure not welcomed in 'civilized society,' says governor

Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts has signed a bill into law that largely bans dismemberment abortions, declaring that the procedure should not exist "in a humane, civilized society."
The state's unicameral legislature voted 33-8 on Thursday to pass LB814, which bans dilation and

evacuation abortions save in the event of a life-threatening medical emergency.
"It shall be unlawful for any person to purposely perform or attempt to perform a dismemberment abortion and thereby kill an unborn child unless a dismemberment abortion is necessary due to a medical emergency," reads the bill.
"No woman upon whom an abortion is performed or attempted to be performed shall be liable for performing or attempting to perform a dismemberment abortion. No nurse, secretary, receptionist, or other employee or agent who is not a physician, but who acts at the direction of a physician, shall be liable for performing or attempting to perform a dismemberment abortion."
Ricketts signed the bill into law on Saturday, saying in a statement that "Nebraska is a pro-life state, and this week the Legislature took an important step to strengthen our culture of life."
"[Senator Suzanne Geist's] bill bans the horrific procedure of dismemberment abortion, which tears apart a living baby's body limb by limb," stated the governor.
"This brutal procedure has no place in a humane, civilized society. I commend Sen. Geist, and the bill's supporters in the Unicameral, for outlawing this barbaric practice in Nebraska."
The Nebraska chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union denounced the bill in a series of posts to Twitter, promising to overturn the new law.
"LB 814 disregards Nebraskans' health and undermines their freedom to make personal decisions in consultation with their physicians," tweeted the ACLU of Nebraska.
"It puts a narrow ideological agenda over patient health. It makes it a crime for doctors to use their best medical judgment."
Ricketts voiced support for a dismemberment abortion ban in a column published in March, labeling it a "barbaric procedure" that "literally rips apart a preborn child."
"Imagine watching a sleeping baby girl peacefully suck her thumb inside of her mother's womb. Then consider the horror of seeing that same baby girl flail her tiny arms and legs as an abortionist uses forceps to clutch at her body," wrote Ricketts.
"Senators have the opportunity this session to act quickly and decisively to end this horrendous form of abortion."
Dismemberment abortion bans have previously been passed in Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas and West Virginia.
Although courts have typically blocked or struck down such legislation, a decision earlier this month by a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit allowed for Arkansas' ban to take effect on Aug. 28.
By Michael Gryboski

Scottsbluff SH: Watered-down tax relief bill passes as unicameral sees dramatic, emotional conclusion

It was a most unusual year in the Nebraska Unicameral.
From the bills, the fights, the plexiglass or the senators themselves, the waning days of the 2020 legislature came to close on Thursday.
So did — at least for now — the debate over tax relief, abortion restrictions and business incentives.
The tax relief bill, LB 1107, was first up on the final day.
Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha spoke first on the bill.
"We shouldn't vote for a bill nobody likes," Wayne said.
Wayne argued to the Unicameral that LB 1107 didn't account for an economy after the impact of COVID-19.
LB 1107 was a last-minute compromise and marriage of three bills: Tax relief, business incentives and

money for a University of Nebraska project. The bill was proposed and rushed to the final reading last week.
Wayne and others mounted a last-ditch effort to hold the bill until next year but fell well short of the 17 votes needed to delay passage another year.
The bill sends $125 million to homeowners, businesses and farmland via tax credits. In the first year, schools would still receive money from property taxes. Over time, the tax credit would grow to 18% against property taxes.
The bill — which is the resuscitated version of LB 1106 — also updates the state's business incentive act and promises $300 million to the University of Nebraska Medical Center to build an updated facility. The rest of the facility would be paid for by federal dollars and donations.
While Gering Sen. John Stinner was one of the principal authors and proponents of the bill, Bayard Sen. Steve Erdman was one of its sharpest critics.
"You need to call it what it is, a decrease in the increase," Erdman said last week.
Erdman said the tax relief didn't go far enough and the incentives package "doesn't mean anything to any common citizen of the state."
Erdman joined Omaha Senators Ernie Chambers, Megan Hunt, and Hastings Sen. Steve Halloran in voting against the bill. Wayne didn't vote, bringing the final roll to 41-4 with two senators not voting.
The other major passage was a bill outlawing dilation and evacuation abortions, a second-trimester procedure that opponents refer to as dismemberment abortion.
The bill (LB 814) was introduced by Lincoln Sen. Suzanne Geist.
Critics of the bill, including Omaha's Ernie Chambers, have criticized LB 814 as unconstitutional, saying the bill creates an undue burden to women's right in obtaining an abortion. Chambers called on Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson to weigh in on the legality of the bill.
Peterson said the bill was "likely constitutional" because, in his legal opinion, it did not impose a substantial obstacle to abortion access in Nebraska.
In the end, the bill passed by a single vote.
Gov. Pete Ricketts has indicated he will sign both the tax relief package and the anti-abortion bill.
The day began with speeches from some of the Senators who've reached their two-term limits.
Sen. Kate Bolz of Lincoln, Sen. Chambers of Omaha, Sen. Sue Crawford of Bellevue, Sen. Sara Howard of Omaha, Sen. Rick Kolowski of Omaha and Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk reached the final year of their second term. These senators can run for reelection in four years.
"There's always more that we can do and always more that we should have done," Scheer said.
By Justin Garcia

LJS: Legislative wrap on some bills that passed, others that died

The 2020 Legislature passed 285 new bills and carryovers from the 2019 session by the time they adjourned this month. Senators killed all bills from 2019 and 2020 that failed to pass, did not make it to a vote on final reading or were stuck in committee.
Among the bills that passed:
* Ban dismemberment abortion (LB814), introduced by Lincoln Sen. Suzanne Geist, bans D&E abortion procedures on living fetuses. Geist had to pull the bill from the Judiciary Committee then shepherd it through three rounds of debate, as it was filibustered on all. Opponent Sen. Megan Hunt said the bill was unfairly given favored treatment by Speaker Jim Scheer on its scheduling for debate, and Lt. Gov. Mike Foley, a public supporter of the bill, would not remove himself from the president's chair as he managed debate on the bill.
* Sign language education (LB839 and LB965), introduced by Lincoln Sen. Anna Wishart and Omaha Sen.

Mike McDonnell, passed unanimously and were signed by Gov. Pete Ricketts. Wishart's bill allows Nebraska schools to offer American Sign Language as a language requirement, while McDonnell's bill created a language assessment program for young children who are deaf or hard of hearing to help them prepare to enter kindergarten.
* Racial profiling (LB924), offered by Omaha Sen. Ernie Chambers, requires law enforcement to take anti-bias and implicit bias training and complete testing to minimize apparent or actual racial profiling.
* Athlete endorsements (LB962), introduced by Hunt, would allow college athletes in Nebraska to earn money through their name, image or likeness. Nebraska joins other states that have enacted similar legislation that would give college athletes free range to promote businesses on social media, sponsor camps, or sell private lessons.
* Parole eligibility (LB1004), introduced by Omaha Sen. Steve Lathrop, is a prison reform bill meant to help inmates who qualify out of prison. It is supported by the state's county attorneys and the Omaha Police Officers Association and would allow offenders to become parole-eligible at least two years before their mandatory discharge date.
* Ban on grooming (LB1080), from Lathrop, sailed through the Legislature. The bill requires public and private schools to develop and adopt policies aimed at preventing grooming of students by school employees by clearly communicating what contact with students is appropriate.
* Property tax relief, business incentives, University of Nebraska Medical Center project (LB1107), a compromise package negotiated by a special legislative committee that would provide up to $375 million in new property tax relief, launch a new business development tax incentive program and pledge $300 million in state funding support for a proposed $2.6 billion UNMC project if the federal government selects the Omaha campus as the site of a new national pandemic response center.
Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment (LB1140, 1144, 1148, 1188), introduced by Sen. Sara Howard, the Health and Human Services Committee and Sen. Tony Vargas, would provide legislative oversight of the state's YRTCs, require a plan and establish the position of superintendent of schools to administer educational programs.
Some of the bills that failed or died
* Red flag gun bill (LB58), proposed by Sen. Adam Morfeld of Lincoln, would allow a court to intervene in extreme cases where people have demonstrated they are a danger to themselves or others, have access to a firearm and have made threats of violence. It was advanced to the first round, but not debated and died at the end of the session.
* Expanding Legislature (LR279CA), from Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk, was blocked by a filibuster led chiefly by urban senators. Scheer's plan would have asked voters to give the Legislature permission to expand to 55 senators, and would have required a vote to subsequently do so. While backers said more senators would reduce the size of some rural districts, opponents said any new districts would go to urban areas.
* Nebraska climate plan (LB283), sponsored by Lincoln Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks, failed to overcome a filibuster in late July. The proposal would have transferred $250,000 from the state's petroleum release remedial action collection fund to the University of Nebraska to develop an evidence-based, data-driven strategic plan to mitigate the impacts of climate change.
* Paid sick leave (LB305), sponsored by Sen. Sue Crawford of Bellevue, would guarantee five days of paid leave per year for employees who work for firms with four or more employees, and paid days off for victims of domestic violence. It was filibustered and didn't make it past first-round debate.
* Meatpacking workers (LB667), an amended proposal by Vargas to require meat processing plants to adopt a series of actions to protect workers from COVID-19, including 6 feet of distancing between workers on production lines, reached the floor of the Legislature too late for action before adjournment.
* Racial discrimination (LB1060), introduced by Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha, would add to the

definition of race for workplace discrimination purposes that says race includes, but is not limited to, hair texture and protective hairstyles. The bill was vetoed by Ricketts and since the Legislature is adjourned sine die, she cannot request a veto override.
* Decoupling Nebraska tax code from federal law (LB1074), a proposed amendment by Sen. Tom Briese of Albion to pending legislation to protect an estimated $240 million in state revenue over a three-year period from the negative impact of the federal coronavirus aid package failed to gain approval.
* Redistricting reform (LB1207), introduced by Omaha Sen. John McCollister, emerged onto the floor before the Legislature recessed in March, but was never scheduled for debate. The bill set new guidelines for the Legislature's nine-member Redistricting Committee to reduce partisanship ahead of next year's redistricting process. McCollister requested an opinion on the constitutionality of the bill from the Nebraska Attorney General's Office, which said it would not hamper any future lawmakers from changing how redistricting is done.
By JoAnne Young, Chris Dunker and Don Walton

LJS: A hard days' fight: A look back at session marked by rancor, angst

Two sessions of the Nebraska Legislature took place in 2020.
One happened in what some call the "Beforetime," beginning in January with fairly normal half-day debates, hearings and committee sessions.
Except for that day in February, when more than 100 Second Amendment enthusiasts filled two rooms and spilled out into the halls, some with guns at their sides, the Legislature's short session started smoothly. The economy was doing well, with no big money worries about budget adjustments and spending.
Then the world changed, literally. On March 16, Speaker Jim Scheer announced the Legislature was taking a break because of the COVID-19 pandemic, triggered by one confirmed case in Lincoln determined to be community-spread. Senators weren't coming back, he said, until further notice.
Nebraska had 17 cases of COVID-19 at the time, all but two in Douglas County. One-third of the 49 unicameral Legislature members were from Omaha and the surrounding area, and Omaha had recorded at least one case of the illness considered as community-spread.
That Monday, Gov. Pete Ricketts said only 10 people could gather in one place at one time. So senators went home, leaving the unfinished business of the 2019-21 budget adjustments, property tax reductions, business incentives and school funding reform.
They wouldn't return for four months, except for a three-day stint to enact emergency COVID-19 funding.
Slow-forward to July 20, and all 49 senators returned from across the state, eager to get their work done, to dig into the guts and marrow of the session. Those were 17 hard days, with a sense of urgency and all the tension and disagreement and divide that politics can bring.
With 22,847 virus cases in Nebraska by that Monday, and 313 deaths, COVID-19 precautions were in place, with Plexiglas barriers, no lobbyists on deck, no press roaming the aisles and sergeants-at-arms becoming temperature takers.
But there was no mask mandate for senators, or requirement to distance at least 6 feet. Seven or eight senators never wore masks, and only three or four wore them all the time.
The worldwide pandemic, and the political divide over how seriously to take it, had exacted a toll.
Over the interim, Omaha Sen. Tony Vargas lost his father to the virus. Sen. Mike Moser of Columbus spent five weeks in an Omaha hospital fighting COVID-19 and eventually recovering, but not without residual effects.
By the first afternoon of the senators' return, with a load of work in front of them, those watching began

witnessing the fighting, shaming, accusations, resentment, rancor, shouting and desk pounding by their 49 elected representatives.
Scheer must have seen some of it coming, because he admonished senators on that first morning to please conduct themselves with decorum and courtesy.
They had returned divided and wanting to make noise. The lobby was decidedly quiet, with little or no direct activity from those who usually call senators out and away from debate to give them a pitch or try to direct their voting.
The frustration and tension bubbled over at times, with senators whose speeches were usually measured and thoughtful reduced to red-faced shouting, desk pounding and angry words.
Judiciary Committee Chairman Steve Lathrop was one of those who erupted.
"Nobody's exercising judgment in this place anymore," he said. "We don't care. We're waiting for someone to give us orders, for God's sake. And they're partisan."
The Legislature is not functioning, he said, and it is ridiculous.
On one particularly hard evening of debate, Sen. Mike Groene told Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks to shut up, and threw an angry hand gesture her way.
All the while in the background, a few senators, who were referred to as the Super 7, worked in secret to find a major property tax solution being demanded by farmers, ranchers and urban homeowners.
Appropriations Committee Chairman John Stinner said the Legislature had been stuffing money into the Property Tax Credit Tax Fund for years, but other senators and Ricketts wanted more.
At the 11th hour of the 17 days, the majority of senators were presented with a 149-page bill they would have to read overnight and vote on the next day.
"It took a multitude of senators to work on this, to come up with a final product that we could all agree upon," Stinner said.
They didn't all agree, of course, but many held their noses and passed it, anyway, 41-4.
In the second week, those budget adjustments that had to wait for months got passed and signed with more ease than some thought, in spite of the economic hardships of the pandemic. The state didn't see the financial problems some states did, but senators have been warned there could be a $788 million deficit by fiscal year 2022-23.
Throughout the 17 days, one senator or another rose daily to plead for money for the people who had called their offices or participated in listening sessions hosted by Omaha Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh.
Those people told senators they needed rental assistance or an eviction moratorium or child care subsidies. They wanted virus protections for meatpacking workers.
Senators felt their appeals on behalf of Nebraskans in need fell on deaf ears, because so many others were focused on property tax cuts.
The days and days of Black Lives Matter protests over the summer, after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, prompted Omaha Sen. Justin Wayne to propose a bill establishing police standards boards throughout the state. It got a hearing in the Urban Affairs Committee he chairs, but it was never debated.
As far as anyone knows so far, no senators contracted the virus during the 17-day session, although three senators were exposed by family and close contacts and had to spend a couple of days away from others, up in the balcony, dubbed the "penalty box" or the "COVID choir loft."
As Scheer wrapped up the three weeks Thursday, he verified that the session had not been smooth. Far from it.
"It has been contentious, and not without its share of dissension, especially during the last couple of weeks," he said.
Still, he said, this Legislature accomplished a lot in a divided session, whether senators realized it or not, with 285 bills passed into law, from those carried over from the first session and 483 bills introduced this

year.
They included encouraging broadband expansion to those who are underserved in the state, a tax cut for military retirement benefits, oversight for the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers, creation of a Commission on African American Affairs, and an additional bill to help fight opioid addiction.
"What an awesome responsibility we have all had," Scheer said.
The Legislature adjourned at the end of the 17-day session extension Thursday afternoon, the last session for 46-year veteran Ernie Chambers, and five others: Sens. Kate Bolz of Lincoln, Sara Howard of Omaha, Sue Crawford of Bellevue, Rick Kolowski of Omaha and Scheer of Norfolk.
By JoAnne Young

LJS: Don Walton: Legislature seals bargain; media sees Sasse 2024 presidential bid

It was a long and winding road to additional property tax relief.
And it picked up a couple of legislative passengers along the way.
A new business development tax incentives program and a state commitment to the University of Nebraska Medical Center's proposed new super-project caught a ride to the finish line.
Probably more of a Grand Bargain rather than a Grand Compromise, since everybody got essentially what they wanted.
That package deal was a reminder of the way the Legislature used to tackle big issues, be strategic and be bold: The rural senators want this; what do the urban senators want? Let's talk.
And then the heavy hitters, the deal-makers get in a room and hammer it out. That used to happen a long time ago in the old Cornhusker Hotel at night; this one happened behind a closed door at the Capitol with only senators in the room.
And all but one of those deal-makers will be back next year.
That was a big bill — 155 pages. I'm not sure it had any more readership among the lawmakers than the Affordable Care Act did in the Congress. And I certainly doubt that anyone in the press corps read all of it.
Sometimes, actually quite often, legislating is about trust.
And now that this biggie has been accomplished, there may be more bargains to be made.
Rural senators might want to keep in mind the fact that they will never have as much strength as they do in 2021 ever again. Redistricting is going to cost them a seat or two.
* * *
"Ben Sasse makes his 2024 move," Chris Cillizza at CNN writes online.
"What Sasse is trying to do is carve out a space for a constitutional conservative in the post-Trump GOP," he wrote last week.
"He's not going to run for president in 2024 either as a total Trump acolyte or a full-on Trump hater (and I do think he will run)," Cillizza wrote. "Sasse is trying to forge a third way."
Sasse "might run for president in 2024," Paul Waldman agrees in an opinion column in The Washington Post.
"Sasse is a canny politician, one preparing himself for an uncertain future."
All of that came in the wake of a lively Twitter exchange between Sasse and President Trump after Sasse criticized the president's attempt to govern by executive order with a reminder that "America doesn't have kings."
More speculation no doubt is on the way.
Sasse gets re-elected to a second six-year Senate term this November and then the 2024 presidential election would arrive conveniently in the midst of that second term without an incumbent Republican president seeking re-election, no matter the outcome of this year's presidential contest.

So the opening is there, either at the end of Joe Biden's first term or the end of Trump's presidency.
There were more than a dozen Republican presidential candidates in 2016, including a number of senators, so there's certainly plenty of room for Sasse if he wants to give it a try.
And Sasse wouldn't be the first modern-day Nebraska senator to take a crack at it.
Bob Kerrey sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992, but ran into a governor from a small state who had already paved a path forward with extensive preparation, fund-raising, organization and gathering of early commitments. And Bill Clinton ultimately prevailed.
Chuck Hagel eyed a presidential bid in 2008, visited a number of state caucuses at the 2004 Republican national convention, even took a preliminary scouting trip to New Hampshire, where he was encouraged to jump in, but ultimately decided not to enter the Republican race.
* * *
Finishing up:
* Much-coveted attention in The New Yorker magazine this week for UNL students and their work in a climate change depth reporting project. Bill McKibben's climate change newsletter publishes work by UNL students Aila Ganic and Kayla Vondracek.
* Justin Wayne is the emerging voice in the Legislature.
* In his latest column, Gov. Pete Ricketts took a shot at the general election initiative that would authorize casino gambling at Nebraska race tracks, arguing that "gambling can ruin families, hurt communities and pile on new costs to the state."
* "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." But Postmaster General Louis DeJoy appears determined to do so.
By Don Walton

OWH: The challenges and accomplishments of a most unusual session of the Nebraska Legislature

LINCOLN — Fifty years have passed since the Nebraska Legislature's regular session last took them through the dog days of summer.
In 1969, state lawmakers met for 165 days and didn't wrap up until Sept. 24.
That marked the last of their every-other-year sessions. Senators began meeting every year in 1971, alternating between 90- and 60-day sessions.
Normally, this would have been one of the short sessions. Lawmakers were slated to finish up on April 16.
Instead, it became the most unusual session on record, marked by a four-month break amid a global pandemic.
Most senators wore face masks; all spoke behind clear plastic barriers. No spectators were allowed. Even the throng of lobbyists, usually milling "behind the glass" at the rear of the legislative chamber, were gone.
But lawmakers still managed to pass 150 bills and take care of the state budget.
Here are some key takeaways from the session:
When there's a will, there's a way
Economic woes linked to the coronavirus and opposition by education groups blocked a major reduction in property taxes last year and this year.
But a big block of senators, weary of kicking the political can down the road on the perennial issue, voted to "do something" — even though it's initially a modest increase in tax relief and initially doesn't cost a lot of money. The fiscal impact will be felt a few years down the road, when many of the senators and Gov. Pete Ricketts will have left office.

The merging of three major proposals in Legislative Bill 1107 made it harder for senators to vote against it.

Maybe a senator hated a portion of the bill that gives special tax breaks to certain businesses through the ImagiNE Act, the updating of the state's incentive program for businesses, but liked the new income tax credit against property taxes paid — and so voted "yes."

Omaha senators had a particularly hard time voting "no." A portion of the bill pledges $300 million in state money — five years down the road — for the proposed $2.6 billion center to respond to pandemics and other calamities at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. That project, it's projected, would bring 8,000 well-paying medical jobs to Omaha, a whopper in terms of economic development. But the odds of the NExT Project ever happening are hard to predict, and the $300 million pledge is dependent on the project first securing $1.3 billion from the federal government and private donors.

Budgeting in uncertain times

Nebraska lawmakers found room in the current budget to take care of last year's flooding and irrigation tunnel collapse, allow for some property tax relief and put money toward state priorities, like college scholarships, workforce housing and health and human services provider rates.

But there are a lot of red numbers popping up in the financial outlook for the budget period ending June 30, 2023. Once lawmakers got done this year, the shortfall between projected tax revenues and estimated state spending in the next two-year period topped $787 million. Some senators worried that the gap would grow as economic effects of the coronavirus continue to play out.

State Sen. John Stinner of Gering, the Appropriations Committee chairman, isn't one of those worriers. He said Nebraska is weathering the coronavirus storm better than most states. He predicts the budget will look much better with a little trimming here, a little dipping into cash funds there, and updating estimates all around.

Session in two parts

The 2020 session started normally enough, with lawmakers gathering in early January and spending the next 10 days introducing bills. Then the coronavirus arrived in Nebraska and turned the session — and the rest of the state — upside down.

Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk called a timeout in mid-March, after state and federal officials recommended against gatherings of more than 50 people. Senators tiptoed back for three extremely brief days in late March to approve emergency coronavirus funding.

They didn't gather again until four months later, with new safety protocols in place. By then, George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police had focused public concerns on racial justice and police misconduct — and protesters had left broken windows and a burned building just down the block from the State Capitol.

Some senators wanted the Legislature to address these newly emerging issues and to provide more relief to jobless Nebraskans, beyond what Congress and Ricketts provided. However, legislating is designed to be a deliberative process. There was time for public hearings about protecting meatpacking workers from the coronavirus and requiring more oversight of police. But not enough time to build support and get anything passed.

Speaker is 'Comeback Kid'

Legislators always have some gripes about the speaker of the Legislature, who sets the agenda, establishes priorities and tries to maintain order. But it's hard to argue that Scheer didn't have a comeback year in 2020.

A year ago, the big priorities failed to pass — a property tax relief bill and the ImagiNE Act — and the speaker, as the manager of the show, got some blame for the meltdown. But once he pared down his group seeking a compromise from the "Gang of 10" to the "Super Seven," something got hammered out.

What happened to the middle?

Boy, senators were grumpy this year. Collegiality didn't win out a lot of the time. Partisanship, rather than good policy, played into more and more debates.

At each end of the political spectrum, there seems to be a more sizable block willing to dig in their heels and fight to the bitter end. There's less of a "middle" on the political dial in the Legislature these days. That makes it harder, or at least makes it take longer, to steer measures over the finish line.

The divide was evident in voting on the passage of bills during the past two weeks. A group of senators, all registered Republicans, declined to vote on uncontroversial bills rather than give a green light to measures introduced by colleagues registered as Democrats.

Historic departure

There will never be another legislator like State Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, who is term-limited and most likely spent his last day on the floor of the Legislature on Thursday. His fiery speeches, clever poems, silly singing, lectures on racism and mastery of using the rules to his advantage will go down in history.

But, gotta say, Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha deployed some rules challenges and other maneuvers to do a pretty good imitation at times.

By Martha Stoddard and Paul Hammel

GII: Veterans Memorial Cemetery: Transfer from city to state was result of teamwork

Strong support both locally and at the state level brought about passage of LB911, which begins the process of turning over Grand Island's Veterans Memorial Cemetery to the state.

Gov. Pete Ricketts signed the bill into law Aug. 6. Introduced by state Sen. Dan Quick of Grand Island, the bill was approved July 31 by the Legislature 49-0.

A lot of work remains, but when the process is complete, the Veterans Cemetery and 20 additional acres will become a state veterans cemetery.

Until now, the cemetery was open only to members of the Grand Island Veterans Home. Spouses were buried there only if they were Veterans Home members at the time of their deaths. Hall County Veterans Service Officer Don Shuda said the state cemetery will be operated under the same guidelines as a national cemetery.

Shuda is "extremely happy" that the bill was passed and signed. "Everybody just worked together to make that happen," he said.

He pointed to the leadership of Ricketts and John Hilgert, director of the Nebraska Department of Veterans' Affairs, as well as Quick and his colleagues, state Sens. Tom Brewer and Jim Scheer. Brewer is chair of the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee and Scheer is speaker of the Legislature. "They all jumped on board," Shuda said.

Making it a state cemetery will be important to veterans and their families "to have a place for their loved ones to be buried," Shuda said.

Quick said, "This is just going to be a great honor for our veterans."

But it's also important for Grand Island. The city will be on the national map in being recognized for "supporting veterans again, which is a big plus for the community," Shuda said.

People from central Nebraska will benefit from having a burial site nearby, Shuda said. Relatives won't have to drive to Alliance, Maxwell or the Omaha area to visit their loved ones' graves. Quick said those distances are too far to travel for many families.

The process began last year with Shuda visiting Hilgert "because we had to have the support of the state," he said. Without state support, the effort wouldn't have gone anywhere.

Hilgert expressed "100%" support for the idea, Shuda said. Hilgert then visited with the governor.

Shuda and other supporters then met with Quick, who agreed to introduce the bill.
Local supporters of the idea included Hall County Commissioners Pam Lancaster and Gary Quandt, Jay Vavricek, Dan Naranjo and Mike Ponte, who is chairman of the United Veterans Club Board.
The group visited with city officials to discuss the additional land and other details. Shuda praised the cooperation of Mayor Roger Steele and City Administrator Jerry Janulewicz.
The supporters "wanted to make sure we had all our bases covered before the bill was introduced," Shuda said.
The Grand Island group met with Brewer to ask his position on the bill, and he was "immediately agreeable," Shuda said.
Quick met with representatives of the Nebraska Department of Administrative Services and the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Hilgert's support was important, Quick said.
The groundwork helped clear any potential hurdles "so we didn't have any opposition to the bill at all," Quick said.
Quick said Grand Island residents who testified in Lincoln "did a great job."
Delivering help to his constituents is what it's all about, Quick said.
Local people eventually will be asked to contribute financially. A lot of support will be needed to make the state cemetery a reality.
"But we've sure got a good start on it," Shuda said.
By Jeff Bahr

OWH: Grace period for renewing your Nebraska driver's license, registration is almost over

LINCOLN — The deadline for Nebraskans to renew their driver's licenses or get their vehicles registered is coming up at the end of the month.
Gov. Pete Ricketts gave drivers a reprieve from normal licensing requirements in March as part of the state's efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus. He issued an executive order extending the expiration date for driver's licenses and vehicle titles and registrations that had been due March 1 or later.
Ricketts rescinded the order in July, which means that people have until Aug. 31 to renew anything that expired during that grace period.
Rhonda Lahm, director of the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles, urged Nebraskans not to wait until the last minute and to use the department's website if possible to do their business. She said many offices are especially busy at this time of year as young drivers seek licenses before heading back to school.
By Martha Stoddard

LJS: During Nebraska visit, Dr. Birx says masks should not be a partisan issue

Dr. Deborah Birx, the coronavirus response coordinator for the White House coronavirus task force, said Friday that wearing a mask and taking other precautions to battle COVID-19 should not be viewed as a Republican or Democratic issue.
"It's an issue of protecting Americans, both Republicans and Democrats," Birx said during a news conference in the Capitol rotunda following a meeting with Gov. Pete Ricketts and other officials.
Vulnerable Americans who are older or who have underlying health conditions are particularly at risk, she said, and wearing a mask helps protect those people in both Republican and Democratic households.
"When there is large community spread, it is very difficult — almost impossible — to protect vulnerable Americans," Birx said.

"Don't go visit Grandma without a mask," she said. "I encourage everyone to wear a face covering."
While Ricketts has encouraged Nebraskans to wear a mask in crowded indoor settings or when going out to shop at grocery stores or other retail outlets, he has not issued a mask mandate, arguing that he believes there will be better compliance without such an order.
Lincoln has a mask mandate in effect, and the Omaha City Council recently voted to also mandate the wearing of protective masks.
"There is very strong evidence" that masks help control the spread of the virus, Birx said, as does social distancing.
Birx pointed to "real improvement across Nebraska" in controlling the virus.
During the last 10 days, she said, there has been "an encouraging decline" in cases and in testing positivity in Omaha, and the city's new mask order should help strengthen that trend.
"It looks like it has reached its peak" in Omaha, she said, and the decline in numbers is "encouraging to us."
With 328 cases of COVID-19 announced Friday, Nebraska reached 29,988 positives and 361 deaths, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. Pierce County recorded its first death.
Birx praised the model that the Ricketts administration is using to help open up visitation in assisted-living facilities in a manner that will protect aging residents.
"What I've learned out here — both in Iowa and Nebraska — is that people are taking care of themselves ... and are personally resilient," she said.
Her Lincoln stop was part of a tour of six Midwest states during which Birx is offering guidance in the battle to control spread of the virus.
She has recently expressed concern about the spread of the virus into rural as well as urban areas.
During a visit to Iowa on Thursday, she took note of "sort of a very steady state of new cases" in Nebraska's bordering state.
By Don Walton

OWH: White House coronavirus coordinator reports 'real improvement' in Nebraska trends

LINCOLN — Nebraska and two of its most populous counties got a bit of good news Friday from the coronavirus response coordinator for the White House Coronavirus Task Force.
Dr. Deborah Birx, who is on a tour of the Midwest, said task force officials have seen a “real improvement” in coronavirus trends across Nebraska, particularly in Lancaster and Douglas Counties, within the past couple of weeks.
Specifically, they’re seeing decreasing numbers of cases and test positivity rates.
Last Saturday, the positivity rate for the state as a whole was a little over 10% on a seven-day rolling average, Birx said. On Friday, the state had dropped below 10% to a little more than 9% and will move into what federal officials call the yellow zone with regard to coronavirus risk.
Birx, who met Friday morning with Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, state and local health officials and others, said she believes the state’s case counts and positivity rates will continue to be driven down.
“Together, Nebraskans are making a change that really shows us a path forward through this pandemic,” she said.
On Aug. 5, however, Birx listed Omaha as among the 10 areas of the country exhibiting troubling coronavirus numbers in a weekly call with state and local officials.
Birx said the city was on the list because the area was “going to a very high peak” in terms of cases and positivity rates. The task force, she said, looks to positivity rates as an indicator that the virus is spreading silently through a community, which occurs well before sick people arrive in hospitals.
She also said on the call that residents in areas with high COVID-19 activity should stop family gatherings.

She said bringing together family members in those areas “will create, potentially, particularly if indoors, superspreader events. We’re finding that across the South and moving up into the Midwest.”
Ricketts later said that the White House had bad data when it declared Nebraska a “red zone” state for coronavirus spread. Ricketts and Birx had further discussions about the matter during Friday’s visit.
Birx said Friday that the Omaha area is seeing a decline in the number of cases and in positivity rates. She said residents in the metropolitan area need to continue to drive cases down, as Lincoln has done with its mask mandate and social distancing.
Lincoln mandated masks in indoor spaces in late July and by last week had begun to see a decline in cases.
The Omaha City Council adopted an emergency mask mandate for Omaha on Tuesday.
The move came nearly two weeks after Douglas County Health Director Adi Pour backed away from implementing a countywide mask requirement due to an anticipated legal challenge from Ricketts and the Nebraska Attorney General’s Office.
Birx said mask mandates are critical in communities with a lot of cases. But the message she has received from rural health officials is that residents there already are sufficiently socially distant. Mask mandates in such places may not be as critical.
“In the end, it has to be adapted to the community you’re serving,” she said.
Birx also emphasized that masks work. Not only is there clear scientific evidence supporting face coverings but also real-life public experiences.
Arizona imposed a mask mandate on June 20 and closed bars and gyms in the face of significant community transmission of the virus, with positivity rates above 20%.
Now that state is in the yellow and headed into the green.
“To all those who think masks may not be important, we have a very strong evidence base that they are,” she said.
Birx visited Iowa on Thursday and will meet with officials in Kansas City on Saturday. She’ll then travel on to Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas and West Virginia, driving the entire way.
Birx said the trip also is intended to gather information from around the country and to “ground-truth” the task force’s public health recommendations.
In addition to meeting with health officials, she also met with hospital personnel and university officials. She said she wanted to make sure universities were prepared to test students if necessary. She said she was reassured by the plans she heard. She spoke to university officials about tapping their research labs to expand testing if necessary.
She also heard about Nebraska’s response, including ramping up testing through TestNebraska, beefing up contact tracing to more than 1,000 trained tracers, creating an internal transfer system among hospitals for ill patients and setting up quarantine space for infected people who can’t isolate at home.
She said she will ask Ricketts to talk on the next governors’ call about what the state had done to address the infection control in nursing homes.
“We think the model they have set up could be very useful” to other nursing homes and assisted living centers across the country, she said.
The same goes for practices deployed in some businesses.
“We’ll be taking that example back to other governors,” she said.
For the seven days ending Thursday, the state averaged nearly 263 new cases a day. That is down from an average of 294 new cases a day for the preceding seven days. Nebraska’s case counts overall began increasing in mid-July and have consistently reflected more than 200 new cases a day since then.
During the week ending Aug. 1, Douglas County had its second-worst week for new cases since the pandemic began, with 945 new cases. Last week, the total was 808 new cases. For the seven days ending Friday, the county tallied 754 cases. However, the positivity rate on Friday for the week so far still was

about 10.8%, according to the county's dashboard.
By Julie Anderson

AP: Birx: Tracking the coronavirus is a challenge in rural areas

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Federal officials need to figure out better ways to track the coronavirus in rural, sparsely populated areas where fewer people are getting tested, a top White House coronavirus official said Friday.

Dr. Deborah Birx, the coordinator of the White House's coronavirus task force, said health officials are struggling at times to get a sense of how the virus is spreading outside metro areas.

People in rural areas are often more self-reliant and reluctant to get tested, and in some remote counties, one positive case can lead people to conclude that the virus is more widespread than it actually is, Birx said after meeting with Gov. Pete Ricketts.

Her comments echoed Ricketts' remark last week that some Nebraska counties are so remote that even one confirmed case would result in an abnormally high rate of positive cases.

"What this trip has taught us is we really need to create rural indicators, particularly for rural areas with very low populations," Birx said at the Nebraska Capitol. Her Midwestern tour includes stops in Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma and Arkansas.

Birx said Nebraska's virus outlook has improved over the last 10 days after a sharp rise in cases last month that prompted federal officials to put it in a "red zone" of high-risk states.

The red zone indicator means a state has seen more than 100 new cases per 100,000 within the last week. Birx said federal officials have since placed Nebraska in a lower-risk yellow category because of a drop in the percentage of positive cases.

Ricketts raised a similar issue last week as he criticized the White House's decision to designate Nebraska as a red zone state.

Ricketts, a Republican and vocal supporter of President Donald Trump, said the federal government has been counting multiple tests on the same person as different cases. For example, he said nursing home residents who are hospitalized with the virus are tested numerous times before they're allowed to return home.

"The White House putting us on that list in my opinion was a mistake," Ricketts said Monday at an unrelated press briefing.

Statewide, Nebraska officials have confirmed 29,660 coronavirus cases and 360 deaths, although the actual number is likely higher because some people haven't been tested. A total of 314,516 people have been tested so far, and state officials confirmed 416 new cases on Thursday.

Rural residents may have a false sense of security because the virus didn't strike those areas right away, said Brian Depew, executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs, a rural advocacy group based in Nebraska.

It's more difficult to get tested in rural areas because many drive-thru testing sites are set up in larger and mid-sized towns, and rural residents often aren't as willing to wear masks as city dwellers, Depew said.

"I think in a lot of ways, rural areas in the Midwest were lucky early on, and we've seen a lag in adopting some of the safety measures because of that," he said.

For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness.

Nebraska's online tracking portal says 36% of hospital beds and 80% of its ventilators are available in the state.

Health officials have confirmed more than 5.2 million cases nationwide, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The states with the most confirmed cases are California, Florida, Texas and Georgia.
By Grant Schulte

OWH: 'Essential does not mean untouchable': How a Tyson Food plant contained a coronavirus outbreak

The email landed in Gina Uhing's inbox at 5 p.m. on a Friday.
A potential coronavirus outbreak was brewing at the Tyson Foods pork plant on the outskirts of the small town of Madison, where nearly 1,500 employees worked side by side deboning hog carcasses and packaging hams.
Several workers had tested positive for the virus already, and Uhing, the director of the Elkhorn Logan Valley Public Health Department, and her staff had arranged to get more Tyson workers tested by Nebraska National Guard soldiers in nearby Norfolk.
Then Tyson dropped the eleventh-hour surprise in its email on April 17, the day before the testing event. A vice president and attorney at the company's headquarters in Arkansas wrote that the company had changed its mind. Tyson was not going to turn over any names of workers who might want or need testing. Besides, the company said, meatpacking workers weren't the highest priority for the limited number of testing spots.
"That's when the strong-arming … started," Uhing said.
Uhing and other local officials, including Norfolk Mayor Josh Moenning, weren't willing to accept Tyson's rebuff. They feared that any delay in testing plant workers would only allow the invisible virus to spread, endangering workers, their families and the surrounding communities.
So they dug in. They called out Tyson publicly for what they perceived as a lack of cooperation. They recruited influential political partners to help sway the big corporation. And they helped line up reliable testing for the plant's entire workforce.
Months later, they say those quick, collaborative and assertive actions not only resulted in a better partnership with Tyson — one of the largest local employers — but also succeeded in keeping the outbreak from spiraling.
The number of cases in the Madison County area has increased recently, so local leaders aren't ready to declare victory against the virus. And some warn that meatpacking plants — whose workers account for about 20% of Nebraska's coronavirus cases — are always vulnerable to outbreaks.
So far, however, the Tyson plant in Madison and the surrounding area have had fewer COVID-19 cases than other Nebraska meatpacking hot spots.
For example, in Dakota County — which has 20,000 people and is home to another Tyson plant — 1,900 people have tested positive since the start of the pandemic and 42 people have died.
But in the Elkhorn Logan Valley health district, where roughly 56,000 people live in Madison, Burt, Cuming and Stanton Counties, just over 650 people have tested positive and six died.
"Frankly, I saw in some places local leadership said, 'They're a big employer, they're essential, what can we do?' I think there were things that could be done," Moenning said. "I think what happened here is borne out in the numbers today — effective strategies built on collaboration and local leadership working together and demanding corporate responsibility."
In a statement, Tyson said it coordinates with local health officials and has a third-party health provider that maintains an on-site mobile clinic at the plant.
Tyson recently announced that it was launching a new COVID-19 monitoring system that would allow the company to conduct on-site weekly testing of workers at all of its plants, including those with symptoms

and those without.
“Testing along with educating our team members on the virus and providing the best tools for limiting exposure both at work and outside of work have been key elements of how we are supporting our workforce,” the company said.
* * *
The fear was real.
In mid-April, Uhing started reaching out to other health directors already dealing with meatpacking plant outbreaks. Did they have any advice?
There had been a handful of coronavirus cases in the Elkhorn Logan Valley health district — including a nursing home resident and a health care provider in Norfolk — and she feared that the Madison plant could flare up next.
Her instincts were right: By April 16, two Tyson workers had tested positive for COVID-19, the plant’s first known cases. Within a week, the case numbers at the plant would be in the double digits.
“I hope (and pray) that we don’t end up with another GI or Sioux Falls here,” Norfolk Public Schools Superintendent Jami Jo Thompson emailed Uhing early in the outbreak. Norfolk is 15 miles north of Madison, and many of the plant’s workers live and shop there.
The specter of those two other cities — Grand Island, Nebraska, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota — loomed large. At the time, hundreds of meatpacking workers were being sickened by the coronavirus in both places.
Was Madison next?
Workers and their families were scared. They paced in the parking lot at Jose Nuño’s Norfolk health clinic, waiting to be tested for the virus that was sweeping the world and was now starting to spread in their small corner of northeast Nebraska.
The son of a Fremont meatpacker, Nuño is a physician assistant who speaks Spanish and runs the Nebraska Health and Wellness Clinic in Norfolk. Workers came to him not just from the nearby Tyson plant, but also the Cargill plant in Schuyler and the WholeStone Farms plant in Fremont, exhibiting the now telltale signs of COVID-19: dry, scratchy coughs, chills, fatigue.
Workers — many of whom are Latino immigrants or refugees from Myanmar and eastern Africa — often carpooled to work and ate lunch together, and their families hung out on the weekends.
“Once there was a known positive within one group, they were all fearful: They wanted to be seen, tested, examined,” he said.
Parts of the state and country were dealing with testing supply shortages, but Nuño had worked early on with a local pharmacist, Brett Louderback, to find a source. The clinic got hooked up with a private Maryland-based laboratory and diagnostics company, CirrusDX, that had created its own COVID-19 test, with quick turnaround times of about 24 hours.
Uhing, meanwhile, was quickly trying to get up to speed on the Madison plant’s complex operations, where different workers in separate areas slaughter hogs and carve different cuts of meat. She had been inside only once or twice, and had just seen the lunch room and a meeting room.
“Interviewing the first cohort of Tyson cases, we didn’t even know to ask what areas of the plant do you work in, because we didn’t know there were different areas,” she said. “ ‘Are you in the ham plant, or are you in the pens? Are you on the production line, or in maintenance?’ You don’t know to ask those questions.”
The physical plant was in Uhing’s health department jurisdiction, but its workers live in 14 different counties. If a worker didn’t live in her four-county district, the health department wouldn’t be notified that they had tested positive.
“It’s very hard to know the breadth of an outbreak when you’re only getting results from the ones who reside with you,” she said.

So early on, Uhing tried to seize upon a testing opportunity through the state's TestNebraska initiative. Nebraska National Guard members were coming to Norfolk on April 18 and could swab the noses of about 100 people for testing. Uhing decided to set aside about a quarter of the testing slots for Tyson workers, and her staff sent Tyson the registration information so they could decide which workers to prioritize.

Then Tyson got cold feet.

It's still somewhat unclear what the initial hesitation was. Uhing thought it was difficult to get layers of lawyers and corporate executives to quickly sign off on getting workers tested, and that Tyson may have felt unfairly singled out when other employers or facilities had positive cases, too.

Others have said that meatpacking plants in general were slow to institute widespread testing and be fully transparent about the true scope of their outbreaks.

In a recent statement, Tyson said "we continue to learn, adjust and adapt as we address these unprecedented and ever-changing times. Facility-wide testing is a very complex process that requires extensive coordination with health officials and involves multiple days to conduct."

Uhing reached out to Gov. Pete Ricketts' office at one point, according to emails obtained by The World-Herald. While the plant's local managers and head nurse, Annie Farrar, seemed to realize the gravity of the situation, she said, the company was not fully cooperative.

"We are being met with corporate gridlock, and it makes containing these outbreaks incredibly difficult at the most inopportune time when time is of critical essence," she emailed Ricketts' office. "Today, we are getting a better feeling of support from Tyson locally, but I do fear that corporate policies and decisions will prevent the local plant management from working with us to the maximized extent."

Uhing also sent Tyson a strict list of recommendations the company should be complying with: universal masking, two-week quarantines for any workers in close contact with positive cases and immediately sending home any employees who sniffled or coughed.

Then she sent out a press release detailing her dealings with Tyson and its decision to back out of the testing event.

The surrounding community took notice.

"The whole idea of COVID locally had not been largely accepted," Uhing said. "But then when first introduction into the community involves one of the larger employers, it doesn't take long for the community panic to take hold and wanting to know and wanting to be reassured that something was being done. We were getting a lot of pressure from concerned community members, community leaders saying, 'Do they have this under control?' "

Moenning posted to Facebook the same weekend. He was hearing from small-business owners who had dutifully closed their bars or shops to prevent the virus from spreading, and they felt Tyson wasn't playing by the same rules.

Even as the number of coronavirus cases tied to meatpacking plants mounted, Tyson and other processing plants had been declared essential by President Donald Trump. Ricketts said plants had to stay open to keep grocery stores stocked with meat.

"I'm hopeful that Tyson, in fact, takes this seriously," Moenning wrote. "For a corporation that's profited millions off the work of area laborers & suppliers for decades, we should expect the utmost in transparency & action rooted in abundance of caution for workers' safety and that of their families and neighbors."

Moenning appealed to Ricketts, too, asking if his office could persuade Tyson to play ball, and to U.S. Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb. Moenning used to work for the congressman, and Fortenberry's chief of staff is a doctor with a background in public health.

Fortenberry said he and his staff were happy to support the local officials by talking with Tyson.

"A local health director dealing with a corporate board room and lawyers 500 miles away? That's a

difficult situation," he said.
A spokesman for Ricketts confirmed the governor also phoned a Tyson executive.
The public and political pressure seemed to work.
"The local plant leaders, they must have contacted corporate pretty fast," Uhing said. "It didn't take long then for a whole different group of Tyson corporate leaders to be in contact with me, and the tone changed. We were getting offers from them to comply and do whatever they could to help us. … They just came back to the table in a very cooperative tone and honestly were very helpful to me from that point forward."
With all the players on board, including state officials, Fortenberry's office, local medical providers like Louderback, Tyson and Elkhorn Logan Valley staff organized mass testing through the Maryland lab. They educated workers on how to isolate and reduce the risk of getting their whole family or household sick. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services sent a team of epidemiologists to crunch data and an infection-control specialist from Nebraska Medicine toured the plant.
More than 1,400 workers, contractors and vendors at the plant were tested by either Tyson or local health care providers at the beginning of May, and the plant was briefly closed to clean and await the test results. Steve Stouffer, group president of Tyson Fresh Meats, appeared via video at a press conference with Moenning, Uhing and other officials to discuss the plant closure and testing.
"They came around to what is our natural impulse in Nebraska, which is to be cooperative," Fortenberry said.
"Our company had been involved in facility-wide testing at several Tyson locations in other states before testing was launched at Madison in May," Tyson said in its statement. "While the approach taken by state and local health officials has not always been the same from one location to the next — resulting in new circumstances and questions — we've always been grateful for their willingness to collaborate and do our best for our team members."
At one point, Uhing was thrown another curveball. While she had been routinely publicizing the number of cases at the Tyson plant, Ricketts told local health departments not to release numbers for specific meat and food facilities unless they had permission from the plants — a move that some perceived as an attempt to gag local health officials and hide outbreaks.
Madison Mayor Al Brandl pushed for the numbers to be released.
"We all have a good reason to know the numbers of infected people who live in this community," he emailed Uhing on May 8. "It is essential to be informed with facts."
Fortenberry's office helped persuade Tyson to publicly release the results of its mass-testing effort, at a time when few companies, including Tyson, were voluntarily disclosing coronavirus numbers at their plants. The Elkhorn Logan Valley health department and Tyson released the results in a joint press release on May 12.
A total of 212 workers tested positive, about 14.5% of the total workforce. That included 74 people who had no COVID-19 symptoms.
"I had already started releasing information prior to the governor's request," Uhing said. "I wasn't asking for new permission to do something, I was basically asking a corporate office for permission to finish what I had already started."
* * *
Madison County's total coronavirus cases per 100,000 residents still ranks 10th highest in Nebraska, according to the New York Times coronavirus tracker. That's a lower rate than in counties like Douglas, Colfax, Saline and Dodge, which are also home to meatpacking plants where outbreaks have occurred.
A Tyson spokeswoman said earlier this month that there are currently "very few active cases at our Madison facility" — fewer than 10.
Nuño said at the end of July that he's seeing fewer COVID-19 patients these days at his clinic.

Tyson says it has spent millions of dollars at its facilities on masks, gloves and face shields for workers, installed plastic dividers in common areas and on some parts of the production line and paid out bonuses to those who kept working.

But one line worker at the Madison plant isn't applauding yet. The worker, who asked to remain unnamed for fear of retaliation, says the danger of a new outbreak hasn't passed.

True, he said, temperatures are scanned at the start of shifts and masks are handed out — but not every worker wears them properly, over both their mouth and nose. And he'd like to see more independent observers from the local health department or the state routinely checking plant conditions.

Some workers' groups and other advocates continue to push for more protections: regular testing, hazard pay and slower line speeds so workers can spread out more.

"They deserve zero credit," the worker said of Tyson. "The fact that Tyson is looking good compared to other pork plants is dumb (expletive) luck."

But local leaders say it's more than luck that the Madison-Norfolk area hasn't seen a major surge in cases. Moenning said the local response, including the growing trust between Tyson officials and area leaders, could be a valuable model for other meatpacking companies and the often smaller, rural communities in which they operate.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that we didn't become the next Grand Island," he said. "I think that's one of the lessons learned in this. Essential does not mean untouchable."

Fortenberry, Moenning and others said Uhing's gutsiness and perseverance — with a dash of diplomacy — led to better outcomes, protecting workers and the surrounding communities and setting an example for corporate transparency.

"From the beginning our goal was twofold," Uhing said. "One, to stop an outbreak and prevent further exposure and spread, and goal No. 2 was to keep the packing plant open, because of their contribution to feeding the world. Even if they had to operate at a lesser capacity, that's better than no capacity at all."

"I have to give Tyson some credit," she continued. "There were some hiccups, but there were a lot of positives."

By Erin Duffy

LJS: Mayor sees evidence of mask mandate's effectiveness; 16 new cases

A likely third straight week of declining new coronavirus cases demonstrates the effectiveness of Lancaster County's mask mandate that took effect almost a month ago, Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said Friday.

The 16 cases confirmed Friday marked the lowest number of new daily cases this week, and Lancaster County headed into the weekend positioned to have the fewest weekly total of new cases since late June.

The new cases raised the county's total to 3,431, and with no new deaths from COVID-19 reported, the toll remained at 19.

Earlier in the week, the Omaha City Council followed Lincoln's lead by enacting a mask mandate of its own, and Gaylor Baird praised the decision.

"Given the proximity of our two cities and the amount of interaction typically occurring between us, we in Lincoln are safer with Omaha having a mask requirement in place," Gaylor Baird said.

Lancaster County's mandate led to a legal battle this month with Madsen's Bowling & Billiards, where the owner defied the city's closure order and told his patrons masks were optional there.

The health department took the bowling alley and pool hall to court to enforce its order, then had the police shut down the business for three days before the two sides reached an agreement allowing

Madsen's to reopen.
Among the requirements in Madsen's compliance plan the Health Department approved was a requirement that staff ask patrons to wear a mask when inside and not advertise actions conflicting with the directed health measure, according to a copy of the plan obtained by the Journal Star.
"We're not asking people to confront each other about their reasons for wearing a mask or not," Gaylor Baird said. "So again there may very well be reasons people don't have them on."
Mask use indoors is required in most cases; however, people seated at a table where they are eating and drinking are not required to wear them, according to the directed health measure.
Health Department staff expect Madsen's will comply with the plan, interim Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department Director Pat Lopez said.
"We have no reason at this time to think that they aren't," she said, noting that she wasn't aware of any new any complaints about violations there since Madsen's reopened.
Her staff will continue to conduct surveillance on the business, as is the case at other bars and restaurants in Lincoln.
"It's hard to say who has a health problem and can't wear a face covering or mask," Lopez said. "But I think if we were in a place doing surveillance and no one was wearing a mask, that would be extremely suspicious."
Ultimately, there comes a point when people are expected to do the right thing, she said.
Risk of contracting the coronavirus in the county remains high, and Lopez's staff decided to keep the risk dial in the orange category for another week, though the data has positioned it close to dropping into the yellow (moderate risk) category, she said.
The positivity rate, which denotes how prevalent positive cases of the disease are when compared with the number of tests being done, has leveled off since peaking in July, she said.
Despite overall increases in hospital stays for all patients, Lincoln hospitals continue to have the capacity to care for coronavirus patients, Lopez said.
But the declines also come as the total number of tests has fallen in recent weeks.
Lopez said she didn't know what exactly may be causing that decrease in testing, but she said it is possible increased mask wearing has reduced the need for some people who were around people infected with the virus to get tested.
Three of four tests in the county continue to come back within three days, but Lopez on Friday called out the testing delays for people who seek testing through CVS Pharmacy.
Its independent testing lab, Quest Diagnostics, has taken between eight and 10 days to turn around tests for Lancaster County residents, which Lopez called unacceptable.
Gaylor Baird's team, along with Gov. Pete Ricketts' staff, have brought their concerns about the testing delays and are working with the company to resolve the issue, she said.
In a statement on its website, Quest Diagnostics said it's trying to increase its capacity, noting that to date it has completed more than 11.2 million tests.
The mayor said she recognizes how surges in cases across the country can have a downstream effect on cities such as Lincoln.
But residents here are asked to stay home while awaiting a coronavirus test result.
"The whole effort is broken down with that kind of a lengthy turnaround time," she said.
Residents seeking testing should instead utilize Test Nebraska, the mayor said.
By Riley Johnson

Washington Post: Facing unmasked diners and sick colleagues, restaurant workers worry about safety — and their livelihoods

On June 17, Jennifer Moreau received a text that said Senate Blue Ash, the suburban Cincinnati restaurant where she worked as a cook, would be closed the following day. All employees would be required to get tested for the coronavirus on their day off, the owner and executive team wrote. According to the restaurant, a line cook had just tested positive.

"Obviously discretions [sic] is key so please refrain from related posts on social media, as it would affect all of our livelihoods," the text explained, according to a screenshot Moreau shared with The Washington Post.

Moreau dutifully got tested but didn't visit the recommended clinic. She found one closer to her home. Moreau thought it also provided same-day results. It didn't. Executive chef Leroy Ansley, who declined to comment for this story, was not happy. He exchanged texts with Moreau, which she shared with The Post, indicating that her decision had put him in a bind, as the restaurant reopened on June 19 with less than half its kitchen staff. Ansley even sent Moreau a photo of chef and co-owner Daniel Wright in a black mask.

"I have to have Dan come in and peel potatoes," Ansley texted. "It is what it is."

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Moreau, 49, never returned to Senate Blue Ash.

She had reasons, starting with her son, Alex Allen, who was a cook at a sister restaurant and who tested positive for the coronavirus on June 23. Even though she tested negative, Moreau was required to quarantine for two weeks because she lives in the same house with her son. But Moreau was also put off by the way Queen City Hospitality Group, the parent of Senate Blue Ash, handled the situation. She didn't like the social media blackout on the restaurant's positive employee. She worried, too, the workplace wasn't safe after a 24-hour shutdown and a round of rapid-response tests, which have a 20 percent false-negative rate. She, after all, has elderly parents, including her mom, who already had contracted the virus.

"Our customers have the right to know that the people serving their food have been exposed to covid," said Moreau, who contacted Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, an advocacy group for hospitality workers, and filed a complaint against Queen City with the National Labor Relations Board.

"It's highly likely that some of them that tested negative were actually positive, which made me even more afraid to go back to work," added Moreau, who worked next to the cook who tested positive. "None of these tests are 100 percent."

Wright, the co-owner of Queen City, denies the accusations and says his company is "doing everything that we can to keep our restaurants safe." He instead points a finger instead at Moreau. He alleges she has been drumming up charges, and faking a coronavirus-positive result, just to collect the extra $600 a week in unemployment, back when it was still available. "Some people just don't want to work," he said.

Across the country, many hospitality workers are afraid to work right now in an industry that's fighting for survival with limited resources, conflicting reopening guidance from government and a significant portion of the population that continues to think the coronavirus is no worse than the seasonal flu. The reopening of restaurants, as Moreau's example shows, has also further frayed the already-fraught relationship between worker and employer.

Workers' fears are as individual as their situations. Some have loved ones who are immune-compromised, and they can't risk bringing the virus home. Some have their own health issues that make them vulnerable. Some work in a part of the country where people don't believe in wearing masks. Some worry their employers are not taking the pandemic seriously. Some have to interact with tourists who may be traveling from hot spots.

Some also have enough savings to try to ride out the pandemic without stepping back into restaurants and bars. But some, such as Lena Schlegelmilch, don't have that luxury. The jobs that offer the flexibility that Schlegelmilch needs — the 20-year-old is a junior at the University of Nebraska at Kearney — are mostly in the restaurant industry, so she continues to work as a server, cook and bartender at Thunderhead Brewing, where her father, Jamie, is general manager.

Since June 22, Gov. Pete Ricketts has allowed most Nebraska restaurants to operate at 100 percent capacity. The Republican governor has also encouraged, but not mandated, mask-wearing among residents. At Thunderhead Brewing, Schlegelmilch said, only about 10 percent of her customers wear masks at any time in the restaurant, creating many more opportunities every shift for the virus to pass from patron to staff. Those who don't wear a mask will sometimes mock her when she does. They'll say she's wearing a "face condom" or explain that "it doesn't protect you as much as you think that it should," she said.

"I used to talk back," Schlegelmilch said, "but I have to make money somehow, so usually I just stay silent, because if you piss them off enough they're not going to tip you."

Schlegelmilch has not only stopped talking back. She's also stopped wearing a mask. Her decision has led to some direct benefits. She made $30 or $40 a night in tips while wearing a mask, and it's now "over $100 in tips every shift," she said.

Thunderhead recommends employees wear masks and has coverings available for staff, but they're not required, said Jamie Schlegelmilch, the GM. "It's just basically up to the customer" to wear a mask, he added. "The best thing we can do is encourage them and hope it will be okay."

Megan Lombardi, 20, can identify with Lena Schlegelmilch. She's a server at the Foggy Bottom location of Duke's Grocery, a small chain of neighborhood pubs in Washington. To save money, Lombardi said, the restaurant cut the hostess who usually would greet customers and remind them about the city's policy requiring them to wear masks except when they're eating or drinking. Without that line of defense, Lombardi spends part of her shift reminding customers to mask up. Some don't listen, such as the table of five who vaped inside and ignored her request to don masks when leaving. Her tip on their $75 tab? Zero. A woman from Florida, without a mask, got in Lombardi's face and mocked her to fellow patrons. Her party left a few singles on a $120 check.

With the bad tips and the lack of customers, Lombardi figures she's making about minimum wage, down from the $30 an hour she used to count on to make rent. Duke's Grocery owner Daniel Kramer declined to comment when asked about Lombardi's complaints.

Yolanda Scott, 51, is a member of the Culinary Workers Union Local 226, which represents 98 percent of the servers, cooks, bartenders, room attendants and others who work on the strip in Las Vegas. Scott has worked as a server at Treasure Island since the casino opened in 1993. When Treasure Island reopened in June, Scott was back on familiar turf in the Coffee Shop, but under unfamiliar circumstances. The new mandated distance between tables has been hell on her arthritis.

But her bigger problem is the customers, most of whom are tourists. Scott serves between 50 and 80

people a day, she said, and none wear masks. Scott said they should put them on while interacting with her, not just for her well-being but for those who share her home. Her partner, Scott said, has a bad kidney and heart, and she is "very nervous" about bringing the virus home from diners who might be visiting Las Vegas from a hot spot.

"You don't know where people are coming from," Scott said.

Her customers' behavior places the burden on Scott to keep her partner and two children safe. She has developed protocols when returning from work. Before greeting anyone, "I take my shoes off at the door and then I go straight to the restroom and remove my clothing and shower." She stuffs her work clothes in a bag to have them cleaned at the casino.

"We require all our guests and employees to wear masks unless eating and drinking," a casino spokesperson said in a statement. "TI employees, including managers, waitstaff and bussers, are tasked with reminding guests to follow procedure for the safety of everyone on property. We take the security of our employees and guests very seriously."

William Morris, 47, hasn't worked in professional kitchens since March 9. He misses, and fears, them. He has been cooking at restaurants for more than 25 years, including stints as head chef at Vermilion in Alexandria and Cherry, the restaurant inside the W Hotel in downtown Washington. But as a cancer survivor, he's vigilant about his health and the conditions that may impact it. His mother, Jewelyn, recently died of covid-19, the disease the virus causes. She went quickly, Morris said. He didn't get to say goodbye.

"You'll have to excuse me," he said, starting to choke up. "My mom was my world. She was my everything."

Morris's concerns are compounded by what he knows about kitchens. They're built for efficiency, not to protect workers from a virus. Kitchens are often compact, designed to limit the number of steps for the cooks who work the line. They're often hot, too, the kind of place where few would want to wear a mask for prolonged periods. Workers will show up even when ill, Morris adds, usually because they don't have sick leave or can't afford the time off.

"You think about the amount of line cooks that are working two jobs," Morris said. "You could be very safe in one restaurant and taking every precaution. But is everybody at all the restaurants going to be the same way?"

In Cincinnati, the case of the Senate Blue Ash employee who tested positive for the coronavirus was never reported to Hamilton County Public Health, as required, said Mike Samet, public information officer for the department. The notification of a positive rapid test would have initiated contact tracing by the department, Samet said, but the restaurant would not have been required to shut down or to test employees.

"There are a lot of questions about that rapid test right now," Samet said. Many of those questions were generated after Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R) tested positive following a rapid-response test, only to learn he didn't have the virus when administered the more accurate polymerase chain reaction test. Hamilton County has not mandated which test to use, Samet said.

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Wright said Queen City had alerted the public about the sick employee at Senate Blue Ash, though there were no mentions on the restaurant's Facebook or Twitter accounts. Nor did Wright say anything on his personal Facebook page, but on June 23, four days after Senate Blue Ash reopened after testing all employees, Wright wrote a lengthy Facebook post about an employee who "likely tested positive" at sister restaurant Pontiac in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. The employee was Allen, Moreau's son, a

cook at Pontiac before he was recently fired for making what Wright said were "transphobic" comments on social media. (Allen confirms the reasons for his termination.)
Some media outlets in Cincinnati wrote stories based on Wright's Facebook post, which the owner pointed to as evidence that the public was notified about Senate Blue Ash. But none of the stories found by The Post mentioned a sick employee at Senate Blue Ash.
Moreau disputes Wright's characterization of her motives. Moreau said she has been in recovery from heroin addiction for almost six years, a constant self-monitoring process that includes a brutal honesty to "keep my end of the street clean." Even though she tested negative, Moreau stayed away from work because she continued to have symptoms, during which time she collected unemployment for five weeks before starting a new job Tuesday at a hotel restaurant.
"I'm the last person that anybody would ever describe as a disgruntled worker. Work was my happy place. I loved my job," Moreau said.
"My customers are more important," Moreau added. "If we had to close down, we all could have got unemployment. We didn't have to lie to the customers and put them at risk. That was wrong."
By Tim Carman

OWH: Coronavirus cases level off statewide but spike in Sarpy, Kearney and North Platte

What's behind the recent spike in coronavirus cases in Kearney and the surrounding Buffalo County? Chris Fankhauser, the emergency response coordinator for the Two Rivers Public Health Department, has a guess: pandemic fatigue.
People want to see their friends and family members, but that desire to socialize and a worrying lack of caution seem to be fueling some coronavirus spread in the Kearney region.
Buffalo County has tallied 152 new coronavirus cases over the last two weeks, according to the state coronavirus dashboard, and Fankhauser said large gatherings — weddings, graduation parties, barbecues — seem to be at least partly to blame.
"We don't like a lot of the things we have to do right now, either, but we also want to try and protect the people in our community as much as possible, so we tough it out," she said.
The Kearney Regional Medical Center began restricting patient visitors again Tuesday in response to the growing number of cases in the community.
"Unfortunately this is going to be a cyclical thing for our community until there's a vaccine," Dr. Scott Smith, the hospital's director of medical affairs, said in a press release. "We will continue to see peaks and valleys in cases. We will adapt our visitor policies in order to keep our patients, staff and community members safe."
The Kearney hospital was treating three COVID-19 patients on Friday, down from eight earlier in the week, a spokeswoman said.
Over the last week, there have been some encouraging signs in Nebraska's coronavirus numbers. Overall cases leveled off or dipped slightly in Nebraska and Douglas County, but regions including Kearney, North Platte and Sarpy County are now wrestling with sudden spikes.
For the seven days ending Friday, Nebraska averaged 269 new coronavirus cases a day, a slight decrease after cases started climbing in mid-July and about the same as the week before, when the state was averaging 270 cases per day. Nebraska hospitals were treating 145 COVID-19 patients as of Friday, down just slightly from the 151 patients hospitalized as of Aug. 6.
The state recorded 16 new coronavirus-related deaths for the week, with 361 people in total dying since the pandemic started.
Douglas County cases dipped for the week, too.
For the seven days ending Friday, the county tallied 754 cases, down from 808 new cases the week

before. However, the positivity rate on Friday for the week so far still was about 10.8%, according to the county's dashboard. Local officials hope a new mask mandate in Omaha will drive down the spread of the virus.
Free face coverings are available at the Douglas County office building at 1111 S. 41st St. on weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
Omaha area hospitals had 101 patients with a confirmed COVID-19 case as of Friday's count, down slightly from a week ago.
Weekly case counts continue to drop in Lancaster County, which implemented its own mask order for indoor spaces on July 20. The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported 16 new coronavirus cases Friday, the lowest daily number since July 6.
"We can now say, with evidence, it's working," Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said at a coronavirus briefing Friday.
Sarpy County cases were actually trending downward for the week. For about three weeks, the Sarpy/Cass Health Department was reporting an average of about 45 cases per week.
The most recent week was looking even better, with about 32 cases per day, after the Health Department reported its highest-ever weekly case count, 294, for the week ending Aug. 1.
But then Thursday hit.
The Health Department recorded 90 new cases in one day, 76 in Sarpy and 14 in Cass. The department also received two new coronavirus-related death certificates for Sarpy County residents — both people older than age 70 with underlying health conditions — though assistant health director Jenny Steventon said she believed both died in July.
The latest cases in Sarpy and Cass seem to be fueled by some of the usual suspects, she said: youth sports, long-term care facilities and some workplace clusters.
The West Central District Health Department, which covers Lincoln, Logan, McPherson, Thomas, Hooker and Arthur Counties, had about 70 confirmed cases between March and mid-July, West Central District Health Department Executive Director Shannon Vanderheiden said on a video call Monday.
In the last two weeks, 79 new cases have been reported in Lincoln County alone, where North Platte is located. At least two dozen cast members of a local production of the musical "Mamma Mia!" have tested positive over the last few weeks, according to the North Platte Telegraph.
"We're really paying close attention to our numbers increasing," Vanderheiden said on the call.
By Erin Duffy

LJS: Lancaster County confirms 21 new COVID-19 cases

Lancaster County reported 21 new positive COVID-19 cases Saturday, as the weekly case count declined for the third straight week, according to the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.
The community total is 3,452. The number of cases for the week ending Saturday was 151, which is the lowest weekly case count since the first week of July. The positivity rate also dipped slightly, from 5.9% the first week of August to 5.7% for the week ending Saturday, which is the lowest positivity rate since late June.
The number of deaths linked to the disease in Lancaster County remains at 19.
Statewide, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported 253 new cases of COVID-19 on Saturday, raising the total case count to 30,241. The total deaths remained at 361.
By Sofia Saric

LJS: Lancaster County confirms 15 new coronavirus cases

Lincoln reported 15 new positive COVID-19 cases Sunday, continuing the city's downward trend in recent weeks, according to the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.
The community total is 3,467. The number of cases for the week ending Saturday was 158, which is the lowest weekly case count since late June. The positivity rate also dipped slightly, from 5.9% the first week of August to 5.6% for the week ending Saturday, which is also the lowest positivity rate since late June.
The number of deaths linked to the disease in Lancaster County remains at 19.
Statewide, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported 253 new cases of COVID-19 on Saturday, raising the total case count to 30,241. There have been 361 deaths linked to the virus in the state.
By Alex Lantz

OWH: Coronavirus cases reported in three metro area school districts

A teacher at Westmont Elementary School in the Springfield-Platteview Community Schools has tested positive for COVID-19, just days before the start of the school year.
Nichole Baugh, the district's spokeswoman, said Saturday that five other teachers at the same school have been instructed to self-isolate after coming into contact with that teacher during a socially distanced lunch at the school.
Substitute teachers will fill the teachers' positions until they can return, Baugh said, and school remains scheduled to begin as planned Tuesday. None of the six teachers will return until at least Aug. 26.
Families were informed of the positive test Thursday, Baugh said, the same day the district was made aware.
The five teachers are being asked to self-isolate out of an "abundance of caution," she said.
Extensive COVID-19 response plans put into place this summer cover the district's response to this situation and others, Baugh said.
Jenni Benson, president of the Nebraska State Education Association, said the union appreciates the Springfield-Platteview school district's work to protect teachers and students but is concerned generally about the safety of Sarpy County schools. The county is densely populated and has no mask mandate, she said, so it will be difficult for schools in the county to safely return at full capacity.
Springfield-Platteview schools are reopening at full capacity. Plastic barriers have been installed around some school desks, and masks will be required of students in most situations, including on buses, while moving around school buildings and when social distancing is not possible.
New cases of COVID-19 were also reported Saturday by the Papillion La Vista Community Schools and the Ralston Public Schools.
Papillion La Vista

- Parkview Heights Elementary families were informed in an email that a staff member tested positive for the coronavirus. Anyone who had direct contact with the staff member has been contacted.
- A presumed case was also reported to Portal Elementary families. Officials said a sixth grade student received a clinical diagnosis and is presumed positive for COVID-19.

Ralston

- Ralston High School reported Saturday that two students, one junior and one senior, tested positive for COVID-19. The district communicated with families considered to have close contact with the students, Principal Jesse Tvrdy said in a letter to Ralston High families.
- The district also told Mockingbird Elementary families that a fifth grader has tested positive.

By Jessica Wade

OWH: After superintendent tests positive, Plainview Public Schools delays start of school year

No one is immune from troubles caused by the novel coronavirus.
One Nebraska school district learned that firsthand. When the Plainview Public Schools superintendent was diagnosed with COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, the school district opted to push back the start of the school year to keep students and other staff members safe.
In an emergency board meeting, held virtually on Wednesday, Superintendent Darron Arlt said he had tested positive for the disease that morning.
Arlt said he started feeling symptomatic on Tuesday. He told The World-Herald that he felt a tightness in his chest and a coughing sensation. Those symptoms were followed by chills, body aches and fevers. Arlt said he experienced the flu-like symptoms for 48 hours. Almost three days after onset, Arlt said he's feeling almost back to normal.
Earlier in the week, Arlt told board members, he was in large and small group meetings with district teachers. He sat at the same lunch table with a handful of staff members for about 10 to 15 minutes. Otherwise, Arlt said he was not in close contact with anyone for more than 10 minutes.
The board voted unanimously to push the start of the school year to back from Aug. 13 to Aug. 24. No other staff members have reported experiencing symptoms.
Plainview is about 30 miles northwest of Norfolk. The school district has about 315 students.
By Kelsey Stewart

OWH: Broken Bow schools cancel bulk of classes after 24 staff members put in quarantine over COVID-19

Classes for most, but not all, grade levels in the Broken Bow School District have been canceled this week after three staff members tested positive for COVID-19 and 24 staff members were placed in quarantine. Superintendent Darren Tobey announced the decision on the district's website.
Tobey said classes for pre-kindergarten and grades 6 through 12 have been canceled through Friday. Nor will there be off-campus learning during that time, he said.
All kindergarten through fifth grade students should report at their normal time Monday.
The decision to cancel school for the affected grade levels was because of staffing, he said. It was made with input from the school board, local medical professionals and the Loup Basin Health Department, he said.
Starting Monday through Sept. 7, the school district will require all students and staff members to wear masks, Tobey said. That includes extracurricular activities and school transportation. The requirement will be revisited before it expires, he said.
All other school events and activities will not require masks. However, masks "are strongly recommended and encouraged to help keep our students safe in the classroom and participate in extracurricular activities," Tobey said.
The school district covers 426 square miles in Nebraska's Custer County and has an enrollment of more than 800 students in preschool through 12th grade.
By Kevin Cole

AP: Nebraska jails, prisons struggle to halt coronavirus spread

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Some of Nebraska's jails and prisons continue to struggle to control the spread of the coronavirus within their walls.

That struggle was on display this week in the Douglas County Jail, which on Thursday confirmed 35 new COVID-19 cases among the jail's employees and seven new cases among inmates. Since the onset of the pandemic, a total of 92 employees, two contractors and 66 prisoners have tested positive at the jail.
"Given the spread of the virus in the facility, we anticipate there are more positive cases," jail Director Mike Myers said. "We are closely monitoring our population and will continue to test anyone who shows symptoms."
The Nebraska state prisons system has also seen new confirmed cases nearly every day this week among staff. The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services said Thursday that two more staffers with the Diagnostic and Evaluation Center in Lincoln had tested positive, bringing the total number of prison staffers across the state infected since the start of the outbreak to 54.
While the seven-day rolling average of new coronavirus cases in Nebraska has not increased, the seven-day average of daily deaths in the state has risen over the past two weeks from 1.86 deaths per day on July 30 to three deaths per day by Thursday.

OWH: Most appear to be following Omaha mask mandate

With his masked kids trailing behind him at the North 30th Street Family Fare, the father offered a sheepish smile.
Yes, he said, requiring masks is a good idea, but he'd forgotten his on Sunday.
A spot check of stores, bars and restaurants over the weekend showed that most but not all people were complying with Omaha's new requirement that masks be worn at indoor public places. A handful of people at local grocery stores weren't wearing masks, and a significant minority of workers and customers at the stores had pulled their masks down below their noses, in violation of the ordinance.
Sean Sanchez of Omaha said he's noticed greater mask wearing since the ordinance went into effect Tuesday.
"Prior to the mandate effective date, I saw people that didn't have a mask walk right into stores that had posted signs of 'Do not enter without a mask,' " he said. "Who knows? If this would have been effective back in March or April, we could be past this stage by now?"
The emergency ordinance runs until Sept. 15, at which point the City Council will revisit it. It requires a mask while indoors in most public places. There are some exceptions, including buildings where people can maintain 6 feet of distance, for children under age 5 and for those with some medical conditions. At restaurants and bars, masks aren't required while seated to eat or drink. A violation carries a $25 fine, but city officials say they will focus on education, not levying fines.
One shopper outside of Omaha wondered if she was noticing a ripple effect of some Omahans taking their shopping elsewhere.
"Sarpy County is awful," Michelle Seiter said Sunday afternoon via Facebook. "Just got done doing the shopping for my parents, and thought I was going to lose it there were so many people in Hy-Vee not wearing masks. Wonder if they are coming from Douglas County/Omaha?"
At Omaha restaurants and bars, staff say they have run into some grumbling, but people generally have been cooperative. However, at one dance club, virtually no one was wearing a mask on the dance floor Saturday night.
At The Max dance club in downtown Omaha, patrons took their masks off as they headed to the dance floor. There's no carve-out in the ordinance that allows dancing without a mask. The club's management had no comment on the matter.
At Leadbelly restaurant at Midtown Crossing, General Manager Jessica Powell said the mandate has eased some of the stress of doing business.
"It's nice that as a business we don't have to go about it by ourselves — it's just required by the city,"

Powell said.
That's a sentiment shared by Alex Bogatz, a patron of Rose & Crown Pub in near-downtown. He said he mostly supports the mask mandate.
"One thing that's really good is it takes the weight off the individual companies having to enforce it themselves," Bogatz said.
Powell said Leadbelly has only had a couple of problems since Tuesday. The restaurant has masks available for $1.
Powell said one group left Leadbelly after being told that they'd have to wear masks, even if they wanted patio seating. For the most part people have been good about keeping them on when they're up and moving around.
"I have seen a few people walking to the bathroom without one and we usually just remind them," Powell said. "There are some people who are unaware of the proper way to wear them, they don't cover their nose, we try to kindly remind people to cover their mouth and their nose."
Nancy Bohenkamp, owner of Harold's Koffee House in the Florence area, said people are cooperating.
"Everybody's behaving just fine," she said. "There are a few people complaining about the masks because they think it's going overboard, but everybody is cooperating."
Some employees expressed frustration because, they say, their company isn't enforcing the ban or is exempt from it.
A clerk at a local vape shop said that more than half of customers haven't been wearing masks in the past week and that the shop isn't going to require them to do so. An employee of a local gym where masks aren't required is concerned about the coronavirus.
"Unfortunately there's an exception for people exercising, so the gym I work at hasn't changed much," he said. "I appreciate people trying to stay fit, but I don't think COVID-19 stops being transmitted just because you're working out."
Lorie Miller of Omaha said she was disappointed when the person delivering her groceries from Baker's wasn't wearing a mask. "I am high risk," she said.
Kathy Holtz, who also is high risk, said the requirement makes her feel safer.
"I have noticed more people wearing masks now," she said Sunday evening. "There were only four people at church this morning who had forgotten theirs, everyone else was covered. It does make me feel safer going out."
By Jessica Wade, Nancy Gaarder and Kevin Cole

OWH: College residence halls are making changes to to address coronavirus, manage students who get sick

Forget the salad bars and waffle buffets in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's student dining halls.
Prepare for your temperature to be taken — daily — in Creighton University residence halls.
And the three pals who wanted to live together in a large dorm room at UNL or Iowa State are going to have to leave one of the guys behind. The days of three students per dorm room are done, at least for now.
Colleges throughout the region have changed some of their residence and dining hall operating procedures to minimize the risk of a coronavirus breakout. Many college leaders say they want their campus to be open for business because most students would rather be on campus than taking classes by computer from home. But the pressure is on administrators to pull that off safely.
Morningside College President John Reynders said last week: "I think any college president that isn't concerned about this fall is crazy." Reynders said his college, in Sioux City, Iowa, will do just about everything possible to keep people healthy. "Am I worried and concerned? You bet."

Megan Failor, Doane University's director of residential life and education, said administrators this fall are bound to be concerned.
"It's definitely going to be a unique year," Failor said. "I think any time there are changes ... that always causes some angst."
Failor said Doane has designated its Colonial Hall residence facility as an isolation place for students with positive COVID-19 tests, symptoms or significant exposure to someone who has the disease.
At UNL, Piper Hall, which wasn't used last year, will serve as an isolation residence hall for those who have tested positive for the coronavirus or show symptoms. Spokeswoman Leslie Reed said Piper is not a medical facility and those with serious symptoms will have to visit a clinic.
Creighton University will designate various private rooms and private bathrooms dotted through its dormitories for students in quarantine and isolation.
Three nurses will check in by phone with students in those rooms and will visit them wearing personal protective equipment if a student's condition worsens, said Tanya Winegard, vice provost for student life.
Winegard said Creighton also will work with a local hotel to help handle quarantining and isolation if needed.
Some schools will require masks and temperature checks and others will recommend them. Most or all will provide additional cleaning of areas such as residence hall bathrooms.
Creighton wants at least daily mandatory temperature checks for students living on campus and those coming to school from off campus. Faculty members and staffers face the same expectation.
And like many schools, Creighton will have a smartphone app (Creighton's is called #CampusClear) that will enable campus community members to screen and monitor their health.
Winegard said Creighton has set up about 15 screening stations (one each in nine residence halls) across campus where Creighton students and others will have their temperatures checked with heat-sensing infrared technology.
Union College, which already has started classes on its Lincoln campus, wants everyone entering buildings to answer some simple health-check questions and to have their temperatures taken.
UNL's Reed also said that five residence halls have especially large rooms on the corners of each floor. But whereas in the past, three could fit into one of those rooms, only two will be allowed this school year. And no bunk beds will be allowed on campus, she said, so that roommates will stay an adequate distance from each other.
The University of Nebraska at Kearney for the first time has offered all students, including freshmen, the chance to live in a single room, with no roommate. UNK says that will improve physical distancing.
UNK spokesman Todd Gottula said 400 students typically get single rooms, but this semester close to 700 will live in them. Students will pay $300 a semester more to occupy a single room.
Move-in day this semester at many colleges will not be a "bring family, relatives, dogs and friends" affair. UNL, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Morningside and the University of Iowa, for example, will allow students to have only two people help them move in.
A survey this summer of 159 American universities found that about 85% are limiting guests on move-in day to two.
A spokeswoman for the Ohio-based Association of College & University Housing Officers-International said last week that the group suggests that colleges work closely with their local health departments for guidance in handling the situation, because areas have differing exposure to the virus.
CEO Mary DeNiro said through the spokeswoman: "We're going to see how it goes. We're going to see a lot of things in the next three of four weeks."
Another phenomenon is the use of professional moving services by some colleges so halls and elevators aren't packed with family members and students. UNL, for example, has hired the national company

United and Student Services to provide the bulk of move-in.
And serve-yourself buffets in campus dining halls will largely be banished. Many colleges — UNL, Morningside, Union College and others — are adding “grab and go” options to their food service so students can quickly pick up a meal and take it back to their room.
Creighton’s Winegard said “worried” is not the word she would use to describe how the university is entering the semester. She preferred the word “vigilant” and said that is something everyone will have to be. She said: “It’s going to take our whole community.”
By Rick Ruggles

OWH: Nebraskans have plenty of options if they're worried about postal delays, secretary of state says

WASHINGTON — Nebraska Secretary of State Bob Evnen has some straightforward advice for anyone worried that Postal Service delays will affect delivery of their mail-in ballot.
“No one can guarantee the performance of the Postal Service,” Evnen told The World-Herald. “If people are seeing reports that are concerning to them, then they ought to be planning to ask for their ballots early and they ought to be considering alternate means of getting their ballots delivered in — or just going to the polls.”
Even if they voted by mail in the primary, voters need to request another mail-in ballot for the general election.
And those ballots will be counted in Nebraska only if they are received by close of polls on Nov. 3 — postmarks are irrelevant.
In Iowa, absentee ballots must be postmarked by the Monday before Election Day and received no later than noon on the Monday following the election.
To be confident that a ballot is counted, Nebraskans can always deposit them at secure drop boxes in each county, Evnen said.
Reports of slower mail delivery have spread as new Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, a Trump ally, implements an overhaul he says will ultimately improve the service.
But cutting overtime, eliminating extra trips to ensure on-time delivery and removing machines that can process high volumes of mail — it all seems to be slowing delivery for now and could mean that ballots sent late in the cycle don’t arrive on time.
The Washington Post reported Friday that the Postal Service had sent letters to almost all states — including Nebraska and Iowa — warning that it can’t guarantee that all ballots will arrive in time.
Democrats have suggested that what’s really happening is that the Trump administration is actively attempting to hamper voting by mail even as many Americans are wary of going to the polls during the coronavirus pandemic.
“Everyone depends on the USPS. Seniors for their Social Security, veterans for their prescriptions, small businesses trying to keep their doors open,” former President Barack Obama wrote on Twitter. “They can’t be collateral damage for an administration more concerned with suppressing the vote than suppressing a virus.”
Trump has talked openly about resisting additional Postal Service funding and said blocking it will hinder the ability of states to do mail-in ballots. Contrary to many experts, Trump says such ballots are ripe for fraud, though he requested a mail-in ballot for Tuesday’s Florida primary.
Kimberly Karol, president of the Iowa postal workers union, said it’s disappointing to see how ongoing changes to the service are causing delivery delays.
“We are beginning to see the results back the mail up,” Karol said. “It’s not going to break the service, but it’s just going to slow the service down.”

Karol noted that relaxing delivery standards and closing post offices with low retail volume have been discussed for years. But those kinds of overt steps require public notification and comment.
She worries the current changes could have a similar effect but are being done without community input. And she wants voters to know — get those ballots in with plenty of time to spare.
“We have the infrastructure and we have been handling election mail for hundreds of years and that’s not going away,” Karol said. “It’s just a matter of making sure that we communicate and let everyone know that this is a year where you really want to make sure you put your ballots in the mail early.”
Across the Missouri River, David Black is retired but still serves as president of the Nebraska Postal Workers Union.
Black expressed confidence that ballots will be delivered appropriately and securely. But he also said there’s a clear desire in some quarters to privatize the Postal Service, which he said would hurt rural areas.
“Nobody in western Nebraska wants to pay UPS $20 to get a package of their medicine, and that’s what it’s going to cost them,” Black said.
Post office delays could become an issue in down-ballot races.
Omaha congressional candidate Kara Eastman, a Democrat, said in a press release that Trump is out to sabotage the Postal Service and rig the election.
Eastman is running against incumbent Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb.
“This attack on the USPS is an attack on American service and values,” Eastman said. “It’s time for Bacon to stand up to his party and stop these attacks on one of our most basic and fundamental institutions.”
Bacon noted that he’s a member of a House caucus that supports the Postal Service and that he signed a letter earlier this year urging top Republicans and the administration to support $25 billion in funding to cover pandemic-related shortfalls at the service.
“I think it’s important for commerce and for the well-being of our country to have a good post office,” Bacon said.
Bacon said Trump should not have put the Postal Service in the middle of the discussion about voting by mail but also said that he agrees that some states do a poor job with mail-in ballots.
Bacon pointed to New York, where a surge of mail-in ballots this summer resulted in a congressional primary race with no outcome for weeks.
“When you go four weeks after an election and there’s still ballots coming in, there’s something wrong with that,” Bacon said.
Evnen said his elections division has been in close contact with local and regional post office representatives. Asked about reports that states might get charged more for mailing ballots this fall, Evnen said he doesn’t anticipate rate hikes but can use stimulus money to pay for unanticipated postage costs.
Nebraska voters can track their ballots on the secretary of state’s website and have options if they’re worried about their ballots arriving in time.
There are secure drop boxes at the Election Commissioner’s or County Clerk’s Office in every county, he said.
“They are outside, they’re open 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” Evnen said.
And there’s always the old-fashioned option of casting a ballot in person on Election Day.
“You can go to the polls,” he said.
By Joseph Morton

LJS: Inmate missing from community corrections center in Lincoln

An inmate is missing from Community Corrections Center-Lincoln after he walked away from a

community program Thursday night, according to the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services. Jeremy Hayes, 39, has not returned to the prison.
He was wearing an electronic monitoring device that was last activated in the area of 13th and E streets, but staff members were unable to find Hayes or the device when they searched the area.
Hayes began a 42-month sentence Aug. 26, 2019, for charges in Lancaster County including possession of a controlled substance and possession of a deadly weapon by a prohibited person. He had been projected to be released March 9, 2021.
Hayes is 6-foot and 175 pounds, with black hair and brown eyes. Anyone with knowledge of his whereabouts is asked to contact local authorities or the Nebraska State Patrol.
The Lincoln prison is one of two community custody facilities operated by the Corrections Department. Inmates are allowed to participate in work opportunities and attend school and religious services with prior approval and without direct supervision.
By Sofia Saric

OWH: Tecumseh inmate with medical condition dies at Lincoln hospital, Nebraska prison official says

An 85-year-old inmate at the Tecumseh State Prison has died, an official in the Nebraska Corrections Department said Sunday.
Larry French died Friday at Bryan Medical Center's west campus.
French was serving a six- to 18-year sentence after being convicted of first-degree sexual assault in Burt County. He began his term in January 2019.
The cause of death is under investigation, but a spokeswoman said French was being treated for a medical condition.
Under state law, a grand jury must conduct an investigation whenever an inmate dies in custody.
By Kevin Cole

LJS: Pandemic legislative recess may have led to property tax relief

The coronavirus-dictated recess that halted the 2020 legislative session for four months may have provided the critical helping hand that led to a grand bargain agreement that resulted in major property tax relief.
"I'm not sure we would have been able to get anything done if not for that horrific pandemic," Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, chairwoman of the Legislature's Revenue Committee, said hours after the big compromise package sailed to enactment on the final day of the legislative session.
"It gave us time to work on it," Linehan said during an interview in her first-floor Capitol office while she ate a salad during a lunch-hour recess.
"We had a lot to do" to reach an uphill compromise agreement, she said, "and a lot of people were counting on us doing something."
So senators and their staff members went to work during the recess, Linehan said, and an agreement that seemed impossible to achieve when senators departed Lincoln on March 25 as the pandemic began to spread came together four months later when they resumed this year's legislative session July 20.
Pressure built not only for property tax relief but also for critical economic development components whose legislative fate was directly locked into the language of LB1107, creating a grand legislative bargain armed with multiple pressure points.
"A lot of people were wanting something very badly," Linehan said. "A lot of people wanted a lot of stuff."

And then suddenly "there was too much at stake for everybody" to allow the package to fail, she said.
Wrapped into the property tax bill was a new business development incentives package to replace the Nebraska Advantage Act, which is due to expire at the end of the year, along with a pledge of $300 million in state funding to help land a game-changing $2.6 billion project at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.
That project, dependent on federal designation of the Omaha campus as the site of a new national pandemic response center, would lure $2 billion in federal funding support, with private donors chipping in the remaining $300 million.
In the end, once senators had returned to Lincoln to resume their 2020 legislative session July 20, it took a special negotiating committee formed by Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk to seal the deal with some hard bargaining sessions.
And then the bill rolled through the Legislature like a freight train, gaining final enactment Thursday with a lopsided 41-4 vote hours before senators adjourned for the year and headed home.
The final agreement includes a provision to guard against growth in state spending, Linehan noted.
That language provides that if state tax revenue increases by more than 3.5% and the state's cash reserve fund contains at least $500 million, half of that excess revenue would be funneled into the new property tax credit program.
"That's a big step in the right direction," Linehan said.
By Don Walton

OWH: Nebraska Legislature closes unprecedented session with emotional debate and big votes

LINCOLN — State legislators closed out a unique, coronavirus-interrupted session Thursday by passing a modest property tax relief bill and barely mustering the votes to adopt a ban on an abortion method.
Unlike most past sessions, there wasn't a "soft landing" on the final day. Senators, including one fighting back tears, launched into an emotional debate that pitted personal liberties against the science of wearing face masks to fend off COVID-19.
It was somehow fitting — the final 17 days of the session were marked by angry exchanges and lectures to behave, at a tenor and volume not usually seen at the State Capitol. The session shut down in mid-March because of the coronavirus outbreak and resumed in late July with new safety practices and precautions.
But Gov. Pete Ricketts still made the traditional end-of-session appearance to thank senators for their work. This year, he highlighted the property tax bill, money for flood relief, a veterans tax cut, creation of a new career scholarship program and passage of the abortion method ban.
"You've accomplished much in these unprecedented — that word's been used a lot — and difficult times," he said.
Thursday marked the final day on the legislative floor for State Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, whose fiery speeches about racism and legendary procedural blockades of bills he hated often fomented frustration, discomfort and grumbling.
Chambers, who is term-limited for a second time after spending 46 years in the Legislature, got in a couple of final verbal punches, calling some senators who are anti-mask "dumbbells" and saying the phrase "and liberty for all" will never apply to Blacks.
And, one last time, the registered-nonpartisan senator called "Repel-icans" (Republicans) "hypocrites."
On the north steps of the Capitol, about 100 people gathered for a surprise farewell rally for Chambers. Participants held signs that said "Fight for Justice" on one side and "Thank You, Senator Chambers" on the other.

Other departing senators took the opportunity to say their farewells in the legislative chamber, including Sens. Kate Bolz of Lincoln, Sue Crawford of Bellevue, Sara Howard of Omaha, Rick Kolowski of Omaha and Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk.

Senators gave final approval to a so-called "grand compromise" on property tax relief and the state's economic development incentives, as well as an abortion bill that detractors said would be immediately challenged as unconstitutional.

It took a last-minute save to pass the abortion measure, Legislative Bill 814.

State Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte, who had been absent since Tuesday, appeared in the nick of time to provide the necessary 33rd vote to shut down a filibuster and pass LB 814. It reaffirmed, backers said, Nebraska's place as a "national leader in the cause for life."

"This is a landmark victory for the pro-life movement," said Karen Bowling of the Nebraska Family Alliance.

The compromise on the property tax relief bill was pulled together by a "super seven" group of veteran senators convened by Scheer. But he said it took "the fabulous forties" to pass the bill — referring to the 41 senators who voted for the package.

In the final days of the session, amid the pandemic, senators were stationed behind clear plastic barriers and had their temperatures checked before entering the legislative chambers. The Rotunda, usually filled with noisy lobbyists, was empty. Three senators who came into contact with people who had tested positive for COVID-19 had to briefly separate themselves from colleagues by sitting in the balcony.

And, on the last day, the debate over whether people should wear masks found its way to the floor.

A round of condemnations followed statements by Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard that wearing masks causes disease, isn't effective in stopping the coronavirus and that mandates infringe on personal liberty. Hydroxychloroquine — a treatment that some trials have shown is ineffective or dangerous — has worked to prevent infections in India, Erdman added.

The statements, said Sen. Tony Vargas of Omaha — whose father died of COVID-19 — were "reckless."

"If you think this (virus) is a joke, please come and talk to me," he said.

Sen. Mike Moser of Columbus, who spent several weeks in the hospital battling the virus, fought off tears as he said his infection left him so weak that he couldn't roll over in bed.

"For someone to come in and say that wearing a mask is somehow a communist plot is irresponsible," he said. "I can't describe it in any other way."

By Martha Stoddard and Paul Hammel

OWH: NU President Ted Carter sees the challenges and potential of Nebraska

Ted Carter took over as the University of Nebraska system's president at a bizarre time, on the cusp of a global coronavirus pandemic that continues to vex the world.

Carter, 61, quoted an unlikely star Friday during his one-hour inauguration, or investiture, at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln.

He said former heavyweight boxing champ Mike Tyson once noted: "Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

The pandemic has been a formidable adversary, said Carter, who became president in January. "We've taken some tough hits." He told a small audience at the center and a larger audience watching online that his credo, of sorts, will be: "Lead. Fight. Win."

Carter came to the NU system after serving as superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy.

He laid out a five-year plan at both the NU Board of Regents meeting Friday and at the inauguration.

"This is a state that is primed and ready to grow," he said. And as the NU system grows, he said, so goes the state.

A key element in the state's growth will be the 51,000-student NU system, with campuses in Omaha, Lincoln, Kearney and Curtis, which he hopes eventually reaches 60,000 students. He said NU's success hinges on taking care of its students, honoring the importance of its workers and running an efficient university system.

That means making sure students graduate in four years, he said, providing generous tuition packages to Nebraska residents and nonresidents, finding them internships and helping them get jobs in Nebraska.

The state's workforce needs, especially in high-skill jobs like engineering, health care and agriculture, are abundant, he said.

Carter's investiture featured a keynote speech by Gov. Pete Ricketts, a 20-minute assessment by Carter and, because of the pandemic, videotaped greetings from 20 people.

They included former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, University of Texas Chancellor J.B. Milliken (who once led NU) and University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor Kwame Dawes, who said he appreciated how quickly Carter reacted to a police officer's killing of George Floyd in Minnesota.

Carter said Nebraska demands efficiency from its institutions, and NU is "going to get leaner. We're going to get smarter."

And while much has been made of the state's brain drain — the loss of talented Nebraskans to other states — Carter wants the NU system to improve its recruitment of other states' talent.

In line with Carter's call for out-of-staters, the regents Friday approved a nonresident admission plan that will take into consideration high school grade-point averages of 3.0 and higher.

The number of students taking standardized testing like the ACT and SAT, a critical factor for college entry for years, has slumped, Carter said, particularly under the coronavirus pandemic.

Adding grade-point average to the criteria rewards disciplined students and hard workers, the regents agreed.

The president said Nebraskans have much to offer. He called this "a critical moment" across the world. If Nebraska can stay flexible and adapt, it can emerge from this turbulent time ahead of competitors, he said.

"So this is a moment of challenge," he said, in which the state and its citizens must maximize their strengths. "We're hardworking. We're sincere. We're authentic. We're unapologetic about who we are."

He quoted America's first naval commander, John Paul Jones, as saying, "Sign on. Come to the sea. Come sail with me," as he recruited his force of sailors about 250 years ago.

And Nebraska must do the same.

"Come to Nebraska. Sign on," Carter said. "Come work and come win with us."

By Rick Ruggles

LJS: 'A bias for action' — Carter outlines 5-year strategic plan for NU

Like so much else in 2020, the unveiling of Ted Carter's five-year strategy for growing the University of Nebraska was put on hold because of the coronavirus.

But the pandemic didn't scrap the new NU president's plan completely.

Instead, the once-in-a-lifetime event, plus the renewed activism around issues of social justice, helped Carter and NU focus the thinking about the role the university plays in the state, who it serves and what its future may look like.

"The pandemic has required us to think differently about everything," Carter said Friday during a meeting of the NU Board of Regents held at Nebraska Innovation Campus.

It's forced a reexamination of how higher education is delivered to students, the costs of doing so, how its employees work, as well as what campus life looks like, among a multitude of other things.

On Friday, the conversations that have taken place during a "moment of challenge" throughout the first

seven months of Carter's tenure as NU's top administrator were made public for the first time.
Carter said the five-year strategy, an outline of NU's highest ambitions as an institution, will plot how the university responds to the new world being created by COVID-19 while charting a path for future growth.
"This is a state that's primed and ready to grow, and I want to do that through the University of Nebraska," he said.
Centered around five broader strategies — student success, workforce development, diversity and inclusion, partnerships, and efficiency and effectiveness — Carter called on NU to have "a bias for action" in its approach to the future.
"The institutions that will succeed are the ones who are flexible, adapt and do things differently," Carter said. "The University of Nebraska is going to be among them."
Access, affordability and attainment
In April, Carter announced the Nebraska Promise, which provides tuition-free education to Nebraska students from families with annual household incomes of less than $60,000.
A few months later, Carter said tuition would be reduced for students taking classes online and said he is planning to enact a two-year tuition freeze for students in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, while also evaluating other costs the university charges students.
As part of his five-year plan, Carter said he wants NU to adopt "a true four-year undergraduate graduation guarantee," where students on track to earn 120 credit hours over four years will graduate on time.
Those who don't graduate in four years because of troubles with course scheduling or other administrative reasons will have the cost of their tuition covered beyond their fourth year, Carter said.
"This is not just getting to a higher graduation rate," he said. "This is about putting our money where our mouth is."
Carter said Friday he also wants NU to explore shifting from a "per credit hour" tuition model to a "block" tuition model, where full-time students would pay the same tuition rate no matter if they take 12 or 18 credit hours per semester.
The block model is intended to incentivize students to take more classes and graduate sooner, but critics of the model say it disproportionately affects lower-income students, students who work while going to school and students with disabilities.
A spokeswoman said the details of what a block tuition model would look like at NU — including at what the semester price would be set — are still being explored.
NU's new president also said he will reengage with the P-16 initiative, which partners K-12 and higher education to encourage students to think about their education beyond high school and would work on transfer agreements with other institutions in Nebraska.
Workforce development
Carter said NU will pursue partnerships with policymakers to expand funding for scholarships in key workforce areas, develop scholarship programs to attract out-of-state students to Nebraska and connect with the private sector to guarantee more internships, jobs and debt forgiveness programs.
While 80% of college-bound Nebraska students attend one of NU's campuses, Carter said the key to growing the state's workforce is incentivizing students from outside the state to come here with a new scholarship program.
"If I was a student living in any state outside Nebraska, and I was thinking about attending my home state university and paying tuition of $50,000, I want them to take a good look at Nebraska," Carter said.
"You can come here with this scholarship program to one of our four campuses for less than one-fifth that cost."
Culture, diversity and inclusion
NU will develop an implicit bias training program to reach every employee, and conduct annual climate

surveys to ensure its campuses are welcoming places for all students and employees, Carter said.
"A growing, thriving university depends on the voices, the ideas and success of all members of our community," he said. "We must be a university for everyone."
He also said NU would not add any new non-faculty positions using state funds until the faculty salaries at UNL and UNMC — the university system's two non-unionized campuses — reach their peer averages.
UNL's faculty are paid, on average, 8.4% less than faculty at their peer institutions — which include the University of Colorado, University of Iowa and the University of Minnesota — while UNMC's faculty are paid 2.9% less on average than faculty at comparable institutions.
Carter said NU will also strive to reduce gender and racial equity pay gaps among its employees.
Partnerships
The president's plan aims to focus university investments in areas where NU has already seen success: water and food security, infectious disease, rural community vitality, national and cyber security, and early childhood education.
Carter said NU will also attempt to increase not only its total private support to $300 million annually, but also the number of donors giving to the university to 75,000 by 2027.
Efficiency and effectiveness
Finally, Carter said NU would find ways to better manage its assets by developing a five-year rolling budget that is structurally balanced, writing a university-wide master plan for its facilities, infrastructure and information technology needs.
"Nebraskans expect their university to operate with common-sense improvements," he said. "We won't spend money we don't have. We'll take care of the resources we do have. And we'll continually look for opportunities to become leaner, more effective and more efficient."
Included in his plan is the creation of a "Red Tape Review" initiative geared at "combating bureaucracy" and reviewing policies that hinder progress for students and employees.
Carter said NU will also "set and achieve" a university-wide sustainability goal.
By Chris Dunker

LJS: Regents OK budget request seeking 2% more in state aid

While it anticipates the need to cut $43 million from its budget over the next three years, the University of Nebraska will ask the Legislature to boost its funding by 2% over the next two-year budget cycle.
The NU Board of Regents approved the two-year budget request Friday, which would add about $12.5 million to NU's taxpayer-funded appropriation in both 2021-22 and 2022-23.
President Ted Carter said while NU continues to respond to ongoing financial stress created by the coronavirus pandemic, he wants the university system to be in a position to emerge stronger when the public health crisis subsides.
"This modest increase reflects the university's commitment to being a good partner to the governor, Appropriations Committee Chairman John Stinner, and the Legislature as they work through fiscal challenges at the state level," Carter said.
Additionally, NU is seeking $2 million in Nebraska Career Scholarship funding, a program announced by Gov. Pete Ricketts and state higher education leaders earlier this year that was included in the budget package state lawmakers finalized earlier this month.
The Career Scholarship, which provides funds for students at NU as well as across the Nebraska State College System pursuing careers in areas deemed critical to Nebraska's workforce, begins this year.
If lawmakers fund the request in full next year, NU would receive $628.3 million in 2021-22 and $642.9 million in 2022-23. The university system, with its campuses in Lincoln, Omaha, Kearney and the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture in Curtis, will receive $616.4 million this year.

Carter said Friday the request is a continuation of a three-year budget plan he presented in June, which calls for $43 million in cuts following revenue losses caused by the pandemic.
Regents approved trimming 0.2% from the university's state-aided budget for 2020-21, and Carter said campus chancellors were preparing to engage their respective shared governance processes to begin looking for more cuts.
But, the new president added, he wants the university to continue moving forward while that takes place. The budget proposal, which includes a proposed two-year tuition freeze, will do that.
"The proposed request prioritizes affordability and access for Nebraska students, limits spending growth to basic operations, and creates long-term opportunities to invest in campus and systemwide priorities like student success, faculty salaries, diversity and inclusion, and facility maintenance," Carter said.
The board approved the request 8-0. It will be submitted to the Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education for approval before going before the Legislature in January.
In other business:
* Regents approved requests to state lawmakers seeking an extension of $11 million in state appropriations to address deferred maintenance needs through 2050, as well as to increase the fund by $2 million in 2021-22 and $4 million in 2022-23.
Those funds would be matched by existing university funds.
Carter said the request is part of a broader university facilities plan that is both "pragmatic and sustainable" for decades to come. NU's facilities represent about 70% of the total state building assets.
* The board also gave its approval for a plan to provide up to $16.5 million from an internal lending program to NU's Information Technology Services, or ITS, to purchase new equipment.
The lending program was created in 2019 with $14 million in savings from a bond refinancing as well as $36 million in recaptured debt service. To date, it has helped fund several small infrastructure projects across NU, as well as a handful of larger projects, including the "Go Big" football facility project in Lincoln.
Chris Kabourek, NU's vice president for business and finance, said the lending program will allow ITS to pay for the new equipment up front, which will help the university achieve savings.
ITS will repay the loan from its annual budget over the next 6-8 years with 4% interest, which will help replenish the fund and pay for further projects.
* Out-of-state students seeking to go to NU will now be able to use their grade-point average to apply for scholarships, after the regents adopted a policy change.
Previously, nonresident students applying for aid at UNL, UNO, UNK or UNMC could only qualify if they ranked in the top 25% of their high school class or had scored a 23 or higher on the ACT.
Regents adopted a change that would allow high school students to submit a minimum 3.0 GPA in their scholarship application.
Carter said the new policy reflects changes in school districts across the country that no longer calculate class ranks, as well as disruption to college-entrance exams such as the ACT and SAT.
UNK student Regent Max Beal said he believes the change will expand opportunities to students to come to Nebraska.
"I think this will put us in a strong position to continually recruit and better accommodate high-quality students to come to the state of Nebraska," Beal said.
Lincoln Regent Tim Clare said once those nonresident students arrive in Nebraska, the university system needs to work with businesses and other sectors to ensure students can find internships and jobs upon graduation in an effort to grow the state.
* In observing social distancing guidelines during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Friday's meeting took place in the Nebraska Innovation Campus Conference Center. Regents, NU staff and seats for the public were spaced apart in the former Nebraska State Fair's 4-H Building.

By Chris Dunker

LJS: UNL joins Big Ten online course sharing program

University of Nebraska-Lincoln students will be able to take courses from some other Big Ten Conference institutions online during the upcoming semester.

The new Big Ten Course Sharing Program will allow students from UNL, Indiana University, the University of Maryland, Michigan State, Ohio State, Penn State and Rutgers to take classes online from professors at all participating institutions, said Patricia Sollars, UNL director of undergraduate education programs.

The program, Sollars said, will allow UNL students to broaden their education horizons and see what coursework is like at other institutions. Students can use these courses to fulfill their elective requirements, and can find more information on the program at creditevaluation.unl.edu/big-ten-online-course-sharing-program.

UNL will offer a variety of courses, including Anthropology of the Great Plains, Medical Greek and Latin, History of South Africa and others. UNL students will be offered a course on world hunger from Maryland, American business history from Penn State, personal finance from Michigan State and many others.

UNL students must be enrolled full time to participate, Sollars said, and can take one course at a different institution each semester. While the program was designed to offer a wider variety of course options during the pandemic, if successful, it will continue.

"We know COVID-19 has limited the educational experiences available to students this year, and this initiative opens doors for academic opportunities across the Big Ten," Elizabeth Spiller, UNL executive vice chancellor, said. "We are committed to doing what we can for our students in this unprecedented moment."

By Nick McConnell

OWH: Pair of Wayne State professors upset by not getting bosses' nod to teach remotely

Two Wayne State College professors contend the Nebraska State College System has played "hardball" by not allowing many faculty members to teach remotely.

One of them, 76-year-old Don Hickey, said the state college system has rejected most of the faculty members' requests to teach from home, even if the professors are seniors with preexisting conditions.

The state college system Friday declined to provide numbers of approvals for remote teaching, and a faculty union representative said she didn't have statistics, either.

State college spokeswoman Judi Yorges said fewer than 20 professors requested various formal Americans with Disabilities Act accommodations for teaching, and some of those included things like attending meetings remotely. She said she didn't know how many requests were granted.

"We appreciate how faculty members have been working cooperatively with college administrators to find creative solutions to minimize health and safety concerns in the classroom," Yorges said. She cited classroom changes, class size reductions and other strategies to combat the pandemic.

The risk of getting severely ill with the coronavirus increases with age, the federal government says. So some older professors or professors with preexisting conditions such as diabetes or lung disease have asked to teach by remote technology rather than in the classroom.

Many college administrators have said students don't like taking classes remotely (sometimes called "distance education") and would prefer to be in the classroom.

The state college system, based in Lincoln, is made up of Wayne State, Peru State and Chadron State Colleges.

Hickey, a history professor who said he has been at Wayne State since 1978, notified college leaders Friday that he would teach remotely whether they approved or not. He also said he has hired an attorney. Hickey said Saturday that the college informed him that his courses will be taught on campus by other faculty members.

"This is a scandal to us — that they're playing hardball with senior faculty and putting them at risk," Hickey said. He said it was his understanding that only two professors were given the chance to teach remotely out of 11 who requested it, but he acknowledged that he wasn't sure if those numbers were accurate.

Another Wayne State history faculty member, 63-year-old Joseph Weixelman, said he, like Hickey, had his request rejected. Weixelman said he has a preexisting condition, multiple sclerosis, and that medications for that disease suppress the immune system.

"I feel scared," Weixelman said. "With my age and a preexisting condition, I'm not sure I would make it through" a bout with COVID-19.

Yorges said in a nine-paragraph statement that decisions "have been made with the best interests of our students and staff in mind. It is unfortunate if these efforts are misrepresented as 'playing hardball.' "

At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, spokeswoman Leslie Reed said 350 employees requested alternate work arrangements because of the coronavirus. "None have been denied," Reed said.

Some Creighton University professors balked this summer when Creighton said it would use the ADA to determine whether special accommodations should be made.

Creighton professors said the ADA doesn't factor in many conditions listed by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as being at risk of severe illness because of the virus.

Creighton administrators then allowed a brief period in which non-ADA requests could be made. Spokeswoman Cindy Workman said Friday: "I don't have numbers, but I do know most were accommodated."

Christy Hutchison, head of the State College Education Association, a faculty collective bargaining group, said she made the point to administrators that the ADA was too limiting. Hutchison said she expects some faculty members to respond to accommodation denials with union grievances or legal action.

Yorges said the on-campus classroom and living experience is vital to the state college students. She said face-to-face engagement with professors, living in residence halls and campus activities "will require faculty and other employees to be physically present on campus."

She said the system has studied the CDC's advice to colleges and has adopted much of the guidance offered. She also said some requests made by faculty members were submitted "very late." Classes in the system start Monday.

Weixelman, who has been at Wayne State for 13 years, said he expected to go to campus Monday and teach. He said he had never felt less cared for by an employer.

By Rick Ruggles

OWH: Nebraska's mail-in voting rate this fall could approach primary's historic number

Months after coronavirus concerns drove a record 75% of Nebraskans to vote by mail in the May primary, election officials expect another swell of absentee ballots this fall.

Nebraska Secretary of State Bob Evnen expects anywhere from 25% to 75% of the state's general election voters to request and return early ballots for the Nov. 3 election.

Douglas County has already received 85,000 requests for absentee ballots, two weeks after all registered voters in the county were sent ballot request cards.

That's ahead of the 60,000 requests the county had received two weeks after two similar mailings were sent to Omaha-area voters this spring, Douglas County Election Commissioner Brian Kruse said.

It’s too soon to say how many requests are being received in the rest of the state, the Secretary of State’s Office said. Sarpy County election officials said they were still counting initial requests.
But most election officials contacted by The World-Herald last week expressed concern about possible delivery delays by the U.S. Postal Service.
The Postal Service recently warned 46 states, including Nebraska, that it could not guarantee timely delivery of completed ballots mailed by a set late-October date, as the post office has for years.
Nebraska law requires absentee ballots to be received by the end of Election Day — postmarks are irrelevant
Local election officials are urging voters to mail their ballots earlier than usual or return them using a county drop box.
The state has not yet decided whether to send a ballot request card to every voter, as it did before to the primary.
Nebraska Democratic Party Chair Jane Kleeb said the state could help people vote from home during the pandemic, by reminding people who requested early ballots in the spring that they’ll need to request a ballot again in the fall. The state could make that easier by sending every voter a request form, she said.
Some county election officials have decided on their own to send out request cards to all voters, including in Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Adams and Phelps Counties.
Local election officials also are offering more options to return ballots. Douglas County, for instance, is adding four more drop box sites, for a total of 13. The state worked this spring to make sure each of Nebraska’s 93 counties has at least one ballot drop box.
For those voters who decide to vote at the polls, state and local election officials said they expect minimal changes and disruptions from how in-person voting worked for the primary.
Douglas and Sarpy County election officials said they plan no consolidations of polling places and would offer safe, socially distanced voting.
Kruse said his office intends to staff 237 precincts with 10 people apiece. Sarpy County Election Commissioner Michelle Andahl said her county plans to staff 52 precincts with eight to 10 poll workers each.
“We feel very well-prepared,” Andahl said.
The state has gathered masks, sanitizer and wipes for polling places. Douglas and Sarpy officials said they’re on track in recruiting poll workers, though they would always welcome more.
One reason for their optimism: Younger poll workers signed up to help with the spring primary. State law also allows counties to draft poll workers as jurors can be for jury duty.
Many first-time poll workers from the May primary will help again this fall, officials say, including Jessica Saffold, 23, who worked as a machine operator and opened early votes.
“Volunteering was a chance to serve my community and give shape to what democracy is,” she said.
County officials’ recruiting efforts may get a boost from two popular social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, which are rolling out a new Voter Information Center.
Users will be able to request a ballot by mail, find their polling place and volunteer as a poll worker, Facebook officials said in a conference call with reporters last week.
Voters have until Oct. 23 to return a request for a mailed ballot. The first wave of ballots will be mailed in late September.
By Aaron Sanderford

OWH: Parents seek solutions for child care issues, and that's crucial for the state's economy

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, child care providers kept Nebraska’s economy humming.
Three out of four children younger than 6 have both parents in the workforce. That 70% total places

Nebraska among the top five in states with a high percentage of working parents.
“We are essential and parents need us so they can work and support their families,” provider Mandy Wheeler said.
That has never been more true. With many schools forced to shift to remote learning because of the pandemic, more working parents than ever have been left scrambling to find child care for youngsters who used to be in class.
At the same time, providers are facing challenges of their own.
Some have seen the number of children in their care trimmed as parents have worked from home.
Others have cut back on children in their care as a safety measure.
One in four providers who responded to a survey from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska had seen their income reduced by more than 50%.
That’s an income that for many providers is already near poverty wages. The median annual pay for center-based teachers falls below the poverty line by almost $1,400 for a family of three: 27% of home-based providers and 20% of center-based teachers depend on some type of public assistance.
What could have caused another big problem for some parents and providers was addressed last week.
The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services announced that providers will be paid subsidies for low-income children under their care doing remote learning. Federal guidelines had not allowed that previously.
Fifty-one percent of respondents in a recent Buffett Institute survey of businesses and in-home providers said they would likely have to close if they didn’t get that kind of additional support.
The announcement by DHHS is welcome news, said Susan Sarver, director of workforce planning and development at the Buffett Institute. But she says more action is needed.
Demand is so high in some areas that providers like Wheeler, who already cares for eight children, has had to say no to several families, leaving them searching for other options.
Parents are turning to friends, families and neighbors, considering a remote method where they check in on their kids periodically, or maybe have older kids taking care of younger siblings.
Others have gotten even more creative. One group of parents is teaching their children together.
“I think what we need as a state and local community is to come together and support families,” Sarver said. “What do child care providers need so they can stay open so they can help families with this problem?’ ”
One way to connect families that need care and providers who have openings has been created using money from the Federal CARES Act. The new Nebraska child care referral network lets providers input their information, such as their fees, what age children they accept and if they have an opening. Parents can then search for the perfect fit by ZIP code.
The website is a collaborative effort of DHHS, Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, the Buffett Institute, Nebraska Extension, First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative and numerous other state and local partners.
Parents can even narrow the search if they want a provider who speaks Spanish or need care for a child with disabilities.
“That’s an excellent solution,” Sarver said. “It gives providers and parents an excellent place to go.”
That could prevent some difficult decisions facing some families who haven’t been able to find care.
Couples have been forced to consider who stays in the workforce and who watches the children.
In those hard discussions, they must explore who has the most flexibility, who is making the most and who can go back into the job market after taking the break, Sarver said.
In a state already struggling to find workers, that can have a direct effect on the economy.
So could a poorly educated workforce.
If solutions aren’t found to help parents over the next few months, their children’s education could

suffer, which could have long-term effects for both the child and Nebraska.
“Care of these young kids is important. It lays the foundation for all later learning and development,” Sarver said. “A professional knows how to take advantage of those moments. They know how to set kids up for success.”
By Marjie Ducey

OWH: Child care providers say they can't teach and watch kids, too

Friends Brooke Morgan and Mandy Wheeler are veteran child care providers.
Neither has a clue how they’ll handle the challenge they face this fall: supervising remote learning for older kids in their care while watching several young children at the same time.
“Trying to sit down and do Zoom meetings with a teacher and also take care of other kids — I feel it’s just so difficult,” Morgan said.
Wheeler has flat out told parents that she’ll do her best, but she’s not sure how much help she can provide with Omaha Public Schools’ classes going all day.
It’s not something she always feels good about.
“I really don’t understand what these parents are supposed to do,” she said.
Although both have received directives from the state about following coronavirus protocols, they’ve received no guidance on how to multitask while schools are doing remote classes. Especially when they are spending so much more time already sanitizing toys and play areas.
They each care for eight children. Morgan has six, plus her own two, ages 5 and 3. Kysen is entering kindergarten, and Morgan isn’t sure how she’ll handle his classes.
Last spring, when she had a child in preschool, she had him bring his iPad and told him to do the best he could. Putting the younger children in a playpen while she would try to help with classes is not an option; they’re used only for napping.
She was hoping that this fall teachers would tape their classes, so parents and providers can tune in when their schedules permit.
“If we can log on at any time, we can do it at naptime when all the other kids are sleeping,” she said.
With a background in the dental field, she doesn’t feel able to adequately teach her older kids anything besides the basics like the ABCs and their colors.
“Not what they are learning in kindergarten,” she said.
Wheeler said some of her friends have considered accepting children in just one age group, so they can do Zoom classes together. But that could backfire, she said, if in-school classes return and the day care provider is left with no kids and no income.
Both have already received several calls from parents looking for day care for their children. It’s especially hard to turn down parents who already have a youngster under their supervision.
“I have been open since the very beginning,” said Wheeler, an 18-year veteran. “I don’t normally take school-age kids, but I took the siblings of some little ones to help out some families.”
Neither has had a scare with COVID-19 and isn’t sure what will happen if one of the kids in their care tests positive.
“Are you going to close for two weeks,” Morgan said, “throwing the lives of multiple families into turmoil because they don’t have day care? I don’t know what to do. If you have any options, let me know.”
By Marjie Ducey

LJS: Parts of Nebraska seeing major drought for first time in 8 years

Last year at this time, many people in northeast Nebraska were still recovering from devastating spring

floods.
This year, they have the opposite problem: It's too dry.
According to the latest Drought Monitor released Thursday by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, about 12.6% of the state is in severe drought conditions. That's nearly double what it was a week ago. Just a few weeks ago, there were no severe drought conditions anywhere in the state.
Overall, more than half the state is considered abnormally dry, and more than one-third of it is experiencing at least a moderate drought.
Compare that to this time last year, when less than 1% of the state was considered even drier than normal.
In fact, it's been eight years since the state has seen major drought conditions, said state climatologist Martha Shulski.
In 2012, drought was widespread throughout Nebraska in the summer. Lincoln, which saw its second-driest July and August in recorded history, had water restrictions for more than a month. The Platte River ran dry in places.
This time around, most of the severe drought conditions are in northeast Nebraska and the Panhandle. An area of about two dozen counties stretching from Sarpy County all the way north to the South Dakota border and as far west as Madison County are experiencing at least moderate drought conditions.
Stanton and Cuming counties are two of three counties in northeast Nebraska whose entire area is in severe drought. The other is Washington County.
The National Weather Service said the city of Stanton has recommended its residents voluntarily reduce their water use, although it has not introduced any mandatory restrictions.
A number of northeast Nebraska counties, including Stanton and Cuming counties, also have authorized emergency haying and grazing on Conservation Reserve Program land because of the drought conditions.
Joe Knobbe, a Cuming County cattle and grain farmer, said the drought conditions have added stress on farmers in his area "on top of an already rugged 2020."
"Drought adds insult to injury at a time when grain and livestock prices are already depressed," Knobbe said. "Early potential for high yields have dwindled as rains continue to miss us, and it is apparent now that dryland fields and fields that depend on feedlot lagoon water for irrigation will take a big hit compared to last year."
On the cattle side, lowered corn yields could increase prices for feed and also lead to producers having to source it from farther away, which also increases costs, he said.
"These economic effects could have a lasting effect on our community," Knobbe said.
The weather service said that over the past six months, parts of northeast Nebraska have a rain deficit of anywhere from 4 to 8 inches compared with normal. By contrast, areas of Southeast Nebraska have seen 4 to 8 inches more than normal.
Lincoln, which has seen above average precipitation five out of the past six years, is slightly below normal for the year, but Lancaster County is free of any abnormal dryness.
Hebron, in Thayer County along the Kansas border, had its wettest July ever, with more than 16 inches. Norfolk, on the other hand, has gotten about 11 inches for the whole year so far, more than 6 inches below average.
All the water from last year's heavy rains and flooding stayed in the ground for several months and helped mitigate the dry conditions somewhat, but that moisture long ago ran out.
According to the weather service, topsoil moisture levels are now 20% to 40% below normal in many areas of northeast Nebraska.
"At this point, it's just so dry that (soil moisture) is not really helping any more," said Hallie Bova, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Omaha.

Conditions are just as bad in the Panhandle, where more than 20 counties are experiencing moderate drought, about half of those with some degree of severe drought. Most of the area also is considered to be at high risk for grass and forest fires.
Scottsbluff has received only about 6 inches of rain so far, about 5 inches below average.
Other areas of the state that have small areas of moderate to severe drought are southwest Nebraska and central Nebraska around the Tri-Cities area.
Shulski said the specific tracks of storms determine where rain has been falling, leading to "the haves and the have nots in terms of precipitation."
"What seems to be influencing where we receive precipitation this spring and summer has essentially been the pattern of upper air flow that drives the tracks of storms," she said in an email. "Storms fire up on the Front Range, building as they move eastward and result in precipitation that is tending to fall in the Sandhills."
A huge swath of the Sandhills, covering more than a dozen counties, has no signs of even abnormally dry conditions. Likewise, an area of Southeast Nebraska, stretching from as far north and west as Polk County to the Kansas, Iowa and Missouri borders, is drought free.
Shulski noted that there have been some "pretty intense storm events" with high one-day rain totals in Southeast Nebraska.
Nebraska is actually better off than some neighboring states. Iowa has about 6% of its area in extreme drought, all of it concentrated in the central part of the state just west of Des Moines. In Colorado, 61% of the state is in severe drought, and nearly 24% is in extreme drought.
Unfortunately, Nebraska could be headed in that direction, with the areas of severe drought expanding or extreme drought popping up in some areas. The forecast for the rest of August favors below-average rain for much of the state.
"It's certainly possible that things could worsen," Bova said.
By Matt Olberding

OWH: Army Corps of Engineers reviewing Keystone XL pipeline water crossings

LINCOLN — A regulatory review of the water crossings on the route of the Keystone XL pipeline through Nebraska, South Dakota and Montana is underway, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced Friday.
The review was required after a federal judge in Montana voided a fast-tracked permit that had allowed TC Energy, formerly TransCanada, to cross rivers, streams and wetlands with its 36-inch crude oil pipeline. The U.S. Supreme Court, in July, refused to overturn the ruling.
The corps, in conjunction with environmental agencies in Nebraska and South Dakota, must determine whether the crossings of rivers and other water bodies comply with the Clean Water Act.
The much-delayed pipeline, planned more than a decade ago, is projected to carry 830,000 barrels of oil a day from the tar sands region of Canada to a pipeline terminal at Steele City, Nebraska, just north of the Kansas border.
But it has faced fierce opposition from environmental groups and some landowners, delaying the project. In 2017, the Nebraska Public Service Commission approved an alternative route across Nebraska, after TransCanada had earlier amended its route to avoid the fragile Sand Hills.
Still, the company constructed a small portion of the pipeline on the Montana border with Canada prior to the court ruling, but construction is not expected to resume until next year.
The pipeline, according to the corps, will affect 729 streams or wetlands on its route. During construction, 33 acres of wetlands and 25 acres of streams would be temporarily affected, the corps said, but the permanent impact will be less than a half-acre of bodies of water.
The corps is expected to hold public hearings on the water crossings in late September or early October,

then make a ruling in the next few months. Testimony will be taken by telephone because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency said on Friday.
The deadline for written comments is Sept. 13. They can be mailed to: South Dakota Regulatory Office, 28563 Powerhouse Road, Room 118, Pierre, SD 57501. Comments can also be phoned in by calling 402-995-2027.
By Paul Hammel

GII: State Fair will have 10 food vendors, 20 commercial vendors

Ten food vendors and 20 commercial vendors will be on hand for this year's Nebraska State Fair.
There will be no concerts inside the Heartland Events Center, but musicians will perform outdoors in the evenings.
So while the fair won't look much like a normal state fair, there will be things to do — and to eat.
There will also be young people to honor. The State Fair, which runs from Aug. 28 to Sept. 7, will be "a celebration of Nebraska 4-H and FFA youth," says Executive Director Bill Ogg.
Some of the plans, though, have not been nailed down. It's not yet certain if the fair will have open class livestock shows.
The 4-H events will take place the first weekend, with FFA the second. They are separated to foster social distancing.
"I am proud of the fair board for supporting our Nebraska 4-H and FFA youth," Ogg said.
Offering those events is very important, he said. And it's not done without cost.
"There's well over $200,000 that will be invested in that," Ogg said.
While he applauds the decision to go ahead with this year's fair and supports it, financially it would have been better for Nebraska to follow the lead of other states and cancel the fair.
But, Ogg said, it will be good for people to get together.
"We are a social animal," he said.
The fair will practice social distancing. Programs and policies are in place to keep people safe, Ogg said.
"But that said, people are hungry to get together," he said. "They are hungry for a wholesome social interaction. That's what the fair is. It's a reunion of people, an annual get-together where you may share a corn dog with your neighbor, who you don't talk to all year long. That's what we want the fair to be."
Officials have invited other breed associations to take part.
"If they can basically fund their own show, then we certainly will provide the facilities and be as hospitable in hosting their event as we can," Ogg said. "But in terms of assuming the risk or offering the prize money that the fair typically does, we can't do that this year."
So some of the fair's events are up to those groups.
"The ball is in their court," Ogg said. "If we get 650 head of cattle entries, we'll have an open class livestock show. If we get a certain number of Boer goat entries, we'll have a Boer goat show. So it's all entry-dependent."
He hopes the exhibitors step up, and he means that in an "encouraging and inviting" way, he said.
"I sincerely hope we can do it. But it's one of those deals where they're coming for the bragging rights and the advertising of having the grand champion at the Nebraska State Fair, not for the prize money and awards, because that's unavailable to us this year," Ogg said.
Musicians will perform evenings from 7 to 9 p.m. The shows will take place at the Pump & Pantry Party Pit on the Pepsi Party Stage.
Those artists are "coming and performing because they love to perform," Ogg said. They will not be paid.
The open class livestock shows, if they happen, will take place during the week.
Also on weekdays, fairgoers may enjoy Raising Nebraska, which Ogg praises.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission will have activities, which will be focused on the weekends.
School tours will not take place, Ogg said.
Admission to the fair will be free.
A veterans program will be held on Labor Day.
The fair's food vendors will have a good variety, Ogg said. Most traditional types of fair food will be available.
"And that's important," he said. "For some reason, it always tastes better at the fair."
Ogg hopes that local residents will visit the fair for lunch or dinner.
The commercial vendors will set up outdoors. Many of them will be more of a display type of vendor rather than an "actual over-the-counter retail type of vendor," he said, adding that "our business partners have been so cooperative."
Those vendors are appearing almost more to support the fair than they are for economic benefit, he said.
The 4-H and FFA events will be strong and attract good numbers, Ogg said. The fair is glad to champion those participants.
"Beyond that, I don't anticipate large crowds. Again, the attractions are so much fewer than what we, I think, want and have expected the fair to provide," he said.
Fair officials "genuinely are excited to host what we've got. And then we take a breath and say we don't have much," Ogg said.
He doesn't mean to take anything away from the youth exhibitors and competitors.
"They are an important spoke of the fair's giant wheel. And we don't have many more spokes, I guess, is where I'm coming from there," Ogg said.
The fair will have equine events.
Ogg expects a foundation quarterhorse show and mounted shooting, team penning and cutting events.
Fair officials recently made a tough decision to not offer any motor sports this year.
It has already been announced there will be no carnival.
There is still a possibility of a bullfighting event, presented by the Ultimate Bull Fighter organization. Tickets would be required for that event, which would run the opening weekend if it happens. The organization would promote the contest at no risk to the fair.
The evening concerts will provide people an opportunity to just get together and celebrate something good, Ogg said.
Last weekend, at the outdoor music festival in downtown Grand Island, Ogg enjoyed visiting with people. The festival was not overcrowded, but the people who attended "were just grateful and happy to have an activity like that," he said.
Ogg, who started his job in June, came to Grand Island from Walla Walla, Wash., where he was general manager of the Walla Walla Fair and Frontier Days.
He grew up in Worland, Wyo., where he graduated from high school in 1972. In addition to the Walla Walla event, he has also worked for the Wyoming State Fair, the Montana State Fair, the Kansas State Fair and the Greeley (Colo.) Independence Stampede.
Ogg can't really encourage large gatherings, because it's contrary to the wishes of health officials and political leaders.
"So we want people to come, again, for the wholesome aspect of a reunion with their neighbors," and to support 4-H and FFA members, he said.
"I personally would like them to come to know that we didn't close the doors, and we're doing the best that we can," Ogg said. He wants to welcome their advice and guidance about "how to return the Nebraska State Fair to even a bigger and a brighter future."
By Jeff Bahr

OWH: Omaha has more shootings in July than any other month in more than a decade

Just after midnight on the last day of July, bullets flew outside homes near 27th and Spencer Streets. Omaha police officers found 10 9mm casings in an empty lot between houses and another five casings outside a patio apartment.

A 48-year-old man's red Kia Rondo was hit eight times.

Fortunately, no one was injured in the torrent of bullets that day. But the gunfire capped a month of violence not seen in Omaha in more than a decade.

Thirty-nine people were shot in July in 28 shootings. Six of those people died.

Police attributed the rise in violence to several factors, including gang feuds. The pandemic also has led to a lack of in-person services and activities for young people and has created economic hardship for many.

Deputy Chief Ken Kanger acknowledged that July was a bad month but also said that violence has been at record lows in previous years. From the end of 2018 into 2019, Omaha recorded a remarkable 125 homicide-free days. And fewer people were shot in 2017 than in any other year in at least the previous decade.

Last year from January to July, nine people had been slain. In the same period this year, 23 people were criminally killed.

"For the year, we know we're up considerably," Kanger said. "Our last four years have been exceptional with regard to violent crime."

July's high tally of shooting victims — either injured or killed by bullets — represents about a 70% increase from May 2016, the second-highest month in the last four years of comparable statistics recorded by the Omaha Police Department.

The last month with more shootings was November 2008, which had 30, according to World-Herald records. But July 2020 even surpassed the 31 victims shot over the 31 days of July 2007 — which at that point was a high and a rallying cry to combat violence in Omaha. The summer violence that year prompted city officials to call for tougher gun laws and additional police officers.

Kanger said some of the recent gun incidents are related to feuds among neighborhood gangs, especially the crips and bloods, though he wouldn't specify which ones. Police say a shooting is gang-related when either the suspect or victim has gang ties.

Many of the shooters or accomplices are as young as teenagers, but even gang members older than 30 seem to be more active now, Kanger said. Violence can spike as retaliation for a high-profile gang member who is shot.

The shooting figures don't include instances in which no people or property are hit by bullets.

The number of "shots fired" calls is at its highest in the past six years — both for the month of July and from January to July 2020.

Shootings rose sharply from May to June, from five people injured by gunfire to 15. In response to the increase, Kanger added eight patrol officers to the gang unit in the beginning of July. Those officers, who have gone through gang liaison training, are added as needed a few times per year to help with investigations, executing search warrants and other police work.

Police continued to target illegal guns or people who are not allowed to carry weapons. In the first week of August, officers recovered 14 guns, and in the past week, officers took an additional 10 guns off the street.

At the weekly meeting of Omaha 360, a coalition of organizations and nonprofits to prevent violence and provide services to the community, gang unit Lt. Keith Williamson described a recent gun arrest near 30th Street and Ames Avenue.

“I wish I could use my crystal ball to show you what we prevented in this case,” he said. “They weren’t probably going to do anything good with that weapon.”
Twice in July, gunshots erupted near large groups of people.
On July 4, shots were fired across a stretch of about 2 miles on North 24th Street, from Patrick to Grand Avenues. People heard about 15 to 20 shots at 3:33 a.m. near the Fair Deal Village Marketplace at 2118 N 24th St., which had a window hit.
Three blocks north, more than 300 people were in the 24th and Lake Streets area at 3:38 a.m. when someone fired shots. A 19-year-old woman suffered a graze wound on her upper left leg below her belt line, and a 37-year-old man was hit in the arm, according to a police report.
At 24th Street and Grand Avenue four minutes later, a 53-year-old man was shot while inside his vehicle.
Two weeks later, eight people, ages 15 to 33, were shot near the Southside Terrace Apartments at 29th and T Streets about 5 a.m. when people in a Dodge Journey fired on a crowd of about 100.
A 15-year-old girl was shot in the chest but survived. Police said the others had injuries that were not life-threatening — most were shot in their arms or legs. Those who were shot declined to speak to a reporter or could not be reached.
Kanger said the department has reassigned detectives who normally investigate burglaries, robberies and property crime to help with non-fatal shooting cases, because those other types of crimes are down.
He believes that hardships caused by life during the pandemic have played a part in the increasing violence. For example, community organizations are unable to provide in-person services and activities for young people.
“We believe that the more active and involved our kids are with intervention and prevention programs, it gives them something to do and keeps them out of trouble,” Kanger said. “What the country is dealing with respect to the pandemic and the civil unrest, all of those things are a factor.”
Recent gunfire in Benson alarmed residents, who held a neighborhood meeting last month with police.
Officers have said the Bucky’s Convenience Store, 5718 Northwest Radial, has become a gang hangout and they’ve increased the police presence in the area. The convenience store also planned to beef up its security, including adding outside security cameras and hiring off-duty police officers.
Just north of the Benson neighborhood, a man awoke in his home to gunfire outside about midnight on July 21, near 63rd Street and Camden Avenue.
The man thought it was fireworks. Police said two men were shooting at a car with a 28-year-old man inside, striking him in the neck.
The neighbor’s car window was hit, and another neighbor’s mailbox and deck were struck by bullets.
The man, who spoke on the condition of not being named because he feared for his safety, said it was the first time he’s heard gunshots on his street in the seven years he’s lived in the neighborhood.
“It was really, really scary,” he said. “My first thought was, I was thinking to move.”
He said he’s still considering that.
“Somewhere I can be safer.”
By Alia Conley

OWH Editorial: Nebraska steps up to battle the emerald ash borer

Nebraskans are used to fighting invasive species. Over the years, we’ve yanked out many a pesky red cedar. Boaters have made sure to decontaminate their vessels to lessen the spread of carp. Local authorities have drained lakes to stymie zebra mussels.
And now comes one of the biggest threats yet, the emerald ash borer.
It’s an example of a tiny pest that lamentably wreaks major havoc, devastating one of our country’s most common tree species. The harm comes not from the adult borer from but its young offspring: The larvae

tunnel under the bark, disrupting the tree's ability to distribute water and nutrients. Death ultimately embraces the tree. Weakened trees are in danger of toppling on homes and public areas.

The borer has been on the march from the East Coast for years. Of late it's crossed into parts of Nebraska, including Douglas County. This week brought word of the discovery of the borer for the first time in Washington and Seward Counties.

The borer puts nearly 47 million ash trees in Nebraska at risk, including 1 million on city-owned land, notes Scott Josiah, director of the Nebraska Forest Service, which has been proactive on this issue.

A small benefit is that Nebraska agencies and communities have had time to prepare. The City of Omaha, for example, made a hard but necessary decision to cut down about one in seven infested or at-risk trees — more than 11,000, in all — from parks and public rights of way. Crews and volunteers are replacing removed park trees with about 19 types of trees that should diversify the local canopy and make it more resistant to a single pest. The city's main private tree-planting partner, Keep Omaha Beautiful, has provided major financial support for the effort.

South Sioux City, in Nebraska's northeast corner, has adopted a notable strategy to get rid of the wood from downed ash trees that are being replaced. The city built a small energy facility that converts ground-up wood into a gas that produces electricity. The Nebraska Forest Service and the state Department of Environmental Quality provided funding for the project.

At the Nebraska Legislature, State Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks of Lincoln has been in forefront for years in prodding state leaders to be fully awake to the borer threat.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture of late has supplied Nebraska with an innovative — indeed, sneaky — weapon in this fight: three tiny wasp species that set their sights on the ash borer. One wasp type lays its own eggs inside the borer eggs. The other species lay their eggs in the borer larvae. The tactic is a bit nasty, but hey, we're at war.

Nebraska has taken appropriate steps so far, but communities must be vigilant. The battle against the borer is far from won.

OWH Editorial: Don't disrespect front-line workers enforcing COVID safety rules

Many of us have seen the situation before: An ill-tempered customer doesn't like a company policy. So in a phone call or face-to-face interaction, he takes out his anger by hurling abusive language at a junior employee at the company, even though that worker had nothing to do with setting the policy.

It's a woefully unfair situation, and it's happened this year as junior workers have tried to enforce corporate requirements for customers to wear masks.

Those employees are just trying to do their job as they're required. At least the mask mandate in Omaha set by the City Council hopefully will lessen the chances for such abuse. Agree with a company's policy — or a mask mandate — or not, these workers deserve respect.

OWH Editorial: There is no place like the Big Ten for Nebraska

As painful as the wait is, we will have Husker football again one day.

When that happens, the University of Nebraska will still be a Big Ten school.

Both of these are good things.

The sports chattering class was in an uproar last week when Nebraska balked, from Coach Scott Frost to President Ted Carter, at the conference's decision to scratch fall football because of the coronavirus.

Those who saw Nebraska's point lashed out at the Big Ten, including World-Herald sports writers.

National commentators in turn showered scorn on Dear Old Nebraska U.

NU's response opened the door to snobbish stereotypes that say Nebraska doesn't belong with the Big

Ten's world-class research universities just because the plowboys once had a good football team. What the pundits on both sides said has a grain of truth: Nebraska and the Big Ten weren't a natural fit 10 years ago. While many of the original 10 have proud sports histories, those schools are among the most highly regarded public universities in the nation, joined by upscale, private Northwestern.
("That's all right, that's OK, we're gonna be your boss someday," Northwestern students chanted during their Mildcats' epic 34-game football losing streak.)
The University of Nebraska-Lincoln has the second-smallest enrollment in the conference and brings up the rear among Big Ten schools in US News and World Report rankings.
While in fact UNL affords a strong education and has produced Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winners, presidential Cabinet members and a guy who's been called the best investor ever, among many more distinguished grads, it's nothing but good for Nebraska to be associated academically with Big Ten schools.
As The World-Herald's Rick Ruggles reported, the school has risen from 91st to 79th in research spending since joining the conference. It is part of the Big Ten Cancer Research Consortium and myriad other partnerships and leadership programs.
The Big Ten is unique among athletic conferences in the depth and breadth of its academic alliances, UNL Chancellor Ronnie Green told The World Herald. Joining the conference changed faculty recruiting "overnight," he said. It has significantly influenced graduate and undergraduate student populations and "upped our game" in a range of areas, from IT to engineering, to bolstering the already-strong business school.
"The Big Ten academic alliance is in every way linked in terms of sharing and learning," Green said.
From the athletic alliance and TV contract, Nebraska gets a revenue share that tops $50 million a year — compared with the $9 million the university got from the Big 12. That money supports one of the nation's healthiest athletic departments, which in turn contributes $27 million a year to academic programs.
This is a long game that outlasts the pandemic and its disruptions. A decade from now, the University of Nebraska will be an academically and financially stronger school for having been in the Big Ten for nearly 20 years at that point. By then, the Wolverines and Badgers, Hawkeyes and the rest should dearly wish the Huskers played sports in another conference.

OWH Editorial: Midlands women contributed greatly to achieving female suffrage

The old-time phrase about the 19th Amendment was that it "gave women the right to vote." The reality, though, was that women were not mere passive entities on this issue. On the contrary, America women stepped forward early in our national history and actively pressed our society for full voting rights. The struggle stretched over generations and, 100 years ago this Aug. 18, culminated in the 19th Amendment's becoming part of the U.S. Constitution.
Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone are among the best-known female activists who sought voting equality for women. But the Midlands itself was home to a wide range of Nebraska and Iowa women who stood out for their dedicated work to end voting discrimination against women. It is a rich, inspiring history. Here are some of the figures deserving appreciation:
» Amelia Bloomer. This longtime Council Bluffs resident was a leading figure for decades on suffrage. In 1856, she addressed the Nebraska Territorial Legislature, urging female suffrage legislation and calling on women to press for needed change: "Let women then arise and demand the restoration of her heaven-born right of self-government." The Legislature's lower house passed a suffrage bill in the wake of Bloomer's remarks, but the upper house failed to act.
» Clara Bewick Colby. This Beatrice resident, Nebraska's leading advocate for female suffrage in the 19th

century, was a leader during the state's 1882 debate on enfranchising women. The two national suffrage organizations held their conventions in Nebraska that year and urged a "yes" vote, though a suffrage proposal on the statewide ballot lost.
» Carrie Chapman Catt. Catt, an Iowa native, provided key leadership as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in the early 1900s. She displayed "exceptional administrative talents," historian Alexander Keyssar writes, "transforming NAWSA from a loosely run association into an efficient organization" that "coordinated national, state and local campaigns." Catt was one of the central strategists who ultimately steered national suffrage efforts to victory.
» Doris Stevens. During the World War I era, a younger generation of suffrage activists took to the streets, mounting high-profile demonstrations in Washington, D.C. Stevens, an Omaha native, was among those jailed in 1917 while picketing the White House. She would devote decades of work, well into the 20th century, to women's causes nationally and internationally.
The Nebraska History Museum in Lincoln currently has an extensive, informative exhibit on female suffrage history.
Prior to adoption of the 19th Amendment, women in some states exercised full or partial voting ability. That was the case in Nebraska, where the Legislature in 1917 approved allowing women to vote in municipal elections and for presidential electors.
In the century since the 19th Amendment took effect, Nebraska has made history with the election of Kay Orr as the nation's first female Republican governor, and Midlands women serve in Congress, in the state legislatures and as mayors of Omaha and Lincoln.
Women devoted enormous energy over the generations to securing suffrage, and the Midlands can be proud of its contributions to that progress. The story continues to inspire.

OWH Jeremy Aspen: All politics aren't at all local anymore

National politics has kidnapped the American psyche, reached into our souls and left fingerprints of paranoia and tribalism. We all feel an angst of two enemies at each other's throats ready to "destroy" and "eviscerate" via their Facebook and Twitter accounts.
"Incrementalism" to a Republican, like me, stirs an uneasy sense of the Democratic Party's decades-long strategy to slowly but surely take away our freedoms, gently launder regulation into the currency of capitalism and to quietly centralize government to D.C. Is it working? Well, take the test by answering this question: When was the last time you participated in local government?
By now most Omahans have probably been a little shocked to see the huge digital sign on the east and north sides of Children's Hospital, and maybe even wondered how it's possible "they" let this happen. As it turns out, I was witness to the whole thing as a member of the Omaha Zoning Board of Appeals. Here is the Cliff's Notes version:

- Children's Hospital at 84th and Dodge began a major addition, which included an $5 million (so I've heard) digital sign.
- The sign was erected.
- Project leaders realized they'd forgotten to get permission (the sign does not conform to local zoning).
- Children's came to the Planning Department and was directed to request a waiver from our board.
- After several hearings we issued a waiver to allow the sign to be turned on for the next year.

The Zoning Board is made up of unpaid citizens and we issue waivers (or not) for projects that don't easily fit into the black and white zoning laws. We determine what it is to be "reasonable" in interpreting the code. And one of the things we take most seriously is public comment, that is to say firsthand accounts of how a decision will affect neighbors. It struck me as odd that not a single citizen had an

opinion during the hearing, but afterward, geez...everyone has an opinion.
Robert Putnam, in his book "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community," paints a clear picture that Americans have become less engaged in community. At this point it's useless to complain about it, or, unfortunately, even to hope to inspire anybody to "get involved." It ain't happening, let's be honest.
Then what's the point of the Republican Party? We've always touted ourselves as "pro-small government," and what is more pro-small government than being pro-small governments? Our whole philosophy had always been that local control is better, but much of our collective energy is absorbed by being "informed" of national events by national pundits like Rush or Hannity, who necessarily focus on issues they can make interesting to a national audience.
When a grappler (or any martial artist, I suppose) is fighting, they look for an opportunity to forcibly direct an opponent's head in the direction that positions the body of their opponent where they want it to go. "Where the head goes, the body follows."
The national news is the sparkly thing that turns our head toward D.C. Our body chases those issues, and the result is that we forfeit our otherwise preferred future to the one "they" gave us. And the "they" are the relatively few local politicians and activists who are changing our communities with almost no community regulators to keep them in check or to help guide our future.
We are victims of a curing agent of inaction, the salience bias, a tendency to pay attention to emotionally striking events and ignore the unremarkable. The cost, though, is quite remarkable, a forfeiture of the freedom to create the home that we want to the relatively few who were willing to run for local office or serve on boards. It's a powerful group of people.
So to my fellow Republicans: It's time we start asking ourselves what the point of the party is these days. It's about to be rebuilt, so are we going to turn our heads inward toward home or will we keep our heads in D.C., the epitome of big government?
To my Democratic friends: Congratulations, our heads are turned toward your prize.
Jeremy Aspen is a businessman and radio host on 1290. His passion as a self-proclaimed "localitarian" manifests itself formally in his appointed seat on the Omaha Zoning Board of Appeals and by staying engaged in political, social or charity opportunities to help make Omaha a better place to live.

OWH Midlands Voices: Renewable energy proves a sound investment for Nebraska

Wind energy is crucial to Nebraska's economic growth. We are fortunate to live in a state that has demonstrated real leadership in the expansion of wind power through pro-growth tax policies and removing regulatory barriers to wind development. Nebraska is on the right path, and given our resources we have tremendous potential for continued growth. New business investment centered on affordable, clean energy generation is a model that is producing results and providing hope for the future.
Already, Nebraska is a top five state in corporate investment in wind energy. Companies such as Facebook, Adobe, Avery Dennison, Hormel, Vail Resorts and Smucker's are all currently making substantial investments in our state's world-class wind resources.
With abundant wind power potential, Nebraska has considerable room to grow to meet both corporate and residential energy needs. Wind currently produces 2,132 megawatts of power in Nebraska. That is enough clean energy to power nearly 700,000 homes, and output is now meeting nearly 20% of our state's total electricity demand. Wind farm projects that will produce an additional 1,000 megawatts are under construction.
Even with those impressive numbers, there remains room for growth. The Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory estimates that Nebraska's total theoretical wind generation

capacity is nearly 100 times greater than our current output.
Having this much clean energy capacity at our fingertips puts Nebraska at a considerable economic advantage. Corporate customers striving to meet their own carbon-reduction goals, while keeping energy costs low, are demanding clean power. Nebraska is well-positioned to meet those needs, and wind power is enhancing our state's economic diversity by attracting companies specifically seeking clean power.
Facebook is a great example. The company's decision to invest nearly $1 billion in establishing new data centers in Sarpy County was driven by the opportunity to purchase clean energy produced in Nebraska. Omaha Public Power District helped facilitate the arrangement, connecting Facebook to the Rattlesnake Creek Wind Farm in northeast Nebraska. Both investments have meant hundreds of millions of dollars in new economic activity, hundreds of new good-paying jobs, and new tax base to ease the property tax burden on existing landowners. This is a model for future economic growth in our state: homegrown clean energy fueling the demands of the corporate marketplace, attracting significant new investment and creating new job opportunities in rural and urban Nebraska in the process.
It's not just tech giants like Facebook and Adobe that see promise in Nebraska's wind energy. Vail Resorts recently committed to purchasing wind energy from the newly constructed Plum Creek Wind project in Wayne County. Vail Resorts has pledged to power its 34 North American resorts with 100% renewable electricity by 2030, and wind energy from Nebraska is critical to reaching that goal.
In addition to helping corporations meet their clean energy goals, Nebraska's economy also benefits from the tax revenue generated by wind projects. In 2019, Nebraska's wind power generated $12 million in state and local tax revenue, primarily in the rural communities that host wind turbines. As a former county commissioner and state senator, I know how much an expanded tax base means to local and state government. It helps provide important services like building infrastructure, maintaining law enforcement and a host of other public services, helping to expand the tax base for both urban and rural taxpayers.
As we continue to explore ways to attract new jobs and keep young people here, overlooking clean energy as a growth opportunity would be a costly mistake. We have tremendous potential to continue leading the country in attracting business investment in our affordable, clean energy resources, bringing the benefits of new economic growth to both urban and rural Nebraskans alike.
Tim Gay, a Papillion resident, is a member of the Omaha Public Power District Board of Directors.

OWH Midlands Voices: Parents should demand strong health protections by school districts

Despite the Omaha area's recent rise in coronavirus cases, most Omaha area school districts are planning on holding in-person classes. This is not safe. My children are enrolled in the Bellevue Public Schools, which are fully reopening, and what's worse, fully reopening without adequate safety precautions.
I am no public health expert, but we do have local experts on this topic at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) who wrote and published a guide, "COVID-19 Back to School Playbook," which is available online. Dr. John Lowe, the lead author, told me that he has briefed 20 school districts on the report, including BPS. Despite these briefings, districts seem to be ignoring much of the guidance.
The authors studied school openings both around the world and here in the U.S., concluding that if communities have high enough infection rates, schools should not reopen because spread within schools is inevitable. They determined that more than 50 cases per million per day is too high for successful reopening. According to the Harvard Global Health Institute, as of Tuesday, Sarpy County was averaging 172 cases per million per day — more than three times that level.
Based on these infection rates, any school district in Douglas or Sarpy County holding in-person rather

than online classes is sacrificing peoples' health and lives. However, in the Bellevue Public Schools, that is just the beginning of the problem.

The UNMC report makes it clear that if schools reopen, social distancing is an integral part of doing so to maximize safety. Because BPS is not limiting the number of students in the building each day, students are unable to socially distance the recommended six feet in classrooms, and will therefore spend the majority of their time in school not distanced from other students. My daughter, who started high school on Thursday, told me that while students were told to sit six feet apart at lunch, many students grouped together outside. She also showed me a picture of students crowded together in the building commons.

The second BPS failure has to do with identifying exposures and quarantining. The UNMC report says that if students have contact with a known COVID case, they should stay home until they are cleared with a negative test. However, when BPS sent out guidance telling parents when to keep students home, it stated that if students lived with someone sick with coronavirus, the students should stay home only if they themselves have symptoms.

According to the UNMC report, people can spread coronavirus without showing symptoms, making this an incredibly reckless policy. Additionally, the BPS policy is to report to the health department as "close contacts" only the people who came in contact with a sick student the 24 hours before a positive test result. Because it is common to be contagious for two to three days before showing symptoms, this will fail to identify everyone who has been exposed. These two policies are wholly inadequate for containing transmission.

The BPS mask mandate is inconsistent. District policy specifies that students will get mask breaks, but allows them to happen indoors. At one of the high schools, the hallways are littered with desks for students to step outside during class and take their masks off — in the same hallways that other students must walk through to get to the bathroom, to the office, etc. The UNMC report makes it clear that masks should stay on inside buildings unless people need to eat or drink. If the district wants to allow mask breaks, they should be outdoors.

If you have kids in Omaha districts where schools are open, or if you have children in the Bellevue Public Schools and this insufficient safety plan upsets you, let these districts know. If they respond by indicating that they are simply following the advice of local health officials, we should wonder why that advice is so radically different from the UNMC report. Teachers, staff, parents, and students are going to fall ill to this virus because our educational leaders are not valuing our health and safety as much as they should.

Gregory A. Petrow, Ph.D., is an associate professor of political science at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. This essay reflects his personal view only and not an institutional position by UNO.

OWH Midlands Voices: It's important to protect Social Security from threats

On Aug. 14, 1935, President Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law. This was a major turning point for our country. It helped us come back from the Great Depression and lifted millions of older Americans out of poverty.

Social Security has been an economic lifeline to millions of Americans. More than 300,000 Nebraskans — myself included — rely on monthly Social Security checks to help us afford groceries, medication and more; it's the single largest source of income for older people in this country. Social Security provides us with the ability to retire with dignity after a lifetime of hard work; without it, our lives would be turned upside down.

Since President Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law 85 years ago, older Nebraskans have been able to rest assured that Social Security would be there for them and their children. Even during the COVID-19 crisis, when our country's economy started heading in the wrong direction, we trusted that Social Security was safe.

We were wrong.

In recent days, Donald Trump issued an executive order that would threaten the Social Security we are depending on. It's his latest failure at fixing the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic: Unable to craft a bipartisan deal with Congress to help rebuild our economy, Trump instead moved on his own to craft executive orders that do more harm than good.

There's bipartisan agreement that Trump's executive orders are the wrong approach. Republican Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska criticized Trump's actions, noting it was unconstitutional to use an executive order to replace a legislative solution. Sen. Chuck Grassley, Iowa's senior Republican senator, expressed concerns that Trump's planned cuts would be a step in the wrong direction for our economic recovery.

As a retired American, my biggest concern is Trump's attacks on Social Security. When he first ran for office, Trump repeatedly promised to protect Social Security. But he's breaking that promise. His new executive order is a payroll tax plan without any safeguards to ensure the long-term stability of the Social Security Trust Fund supported by these payroll taxes, and without any guarantee that seniors' benefits would be protected.

After signing the executive order Trump went a step further: He promised that if he's reelected, he'd make the cuts permanent, sending seniors a clear signal that Social Security is on the chopping block in a second Trump administration.

At a time when older Americans are uniquely at risk, threatening to defund Social Security is especially callous.

President Trump bungled our national response to COVID-19, and more than 160,000 Americans sadly have passed away; 80% of Americans who lost their lives were age 65 or older. In Nebraska, three out of every four people who died from COVID-19 were senior citizens. Those of us who have been blessed with good health have nonetheless been observing social distancing, forcing us to spend time away from our children, grandchildren and other loved ones.

President Trump's approach just isn't working for seniors. On the campaign trail, he made many promises about how he'll fix our country — but over the last four years, he's broken nearly every one. Trump broke his promise to fix health care, he broke his promise to rebuild our infrastructure, and now he's just announced a plan to break his promise to protect Social Security.

With a record like that, retired Nebraskans can't afford four more years of Donald Trump.

Ken Mass, of Omaha, is treasurer of the Nebraska Alliance of Retired Americans.

OWH Midlands Voices: Wind, solar power sectors no longer need subsidies

Thanks to generous tax breaks for wind and solar power, renewable energy producers are reaping huge profits. But the subsidies come at the expense of taxpayers, and they're pushing conventional power plants into premature retirement, which is threatening the reliability of the electric system.

To a large extent, the amount of coal, natural gas and nuclear generating capacity that might shut down in the next few years depends on whether Congress recognizes — and addresses — the serious stresses undermining the U.S. electricity industry.

And the extent to which Congress addresses these issues depends, in large part, on its willingness to end tax credits for wind and solar power.

This would have been unthinkable ten years ago when renewables were struggling for market share, but today wind and solar power are mature technologies that no longer require subsidies.

Currently, wind supplies about 20% of the electricity in Nebraska and as much if not more electricity in Texas, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma and some other states.

Due to advances in wind technology and improved manufacturing processes for turbines, the cost of

wind power has fallen dramatically since 2010.
According to the financial firm Lazard, wind power's levelized cost at the lower end in 2019 was $28 per megawatt-hour. By contrast, the cost of combined-cycle natural gas was $44 per megawatt-hour; coal, $66; and nuclear, $118.
Subsidies definitely reduce wind and solar costs. The Energy Policy Act of 1992 created what is known as the Production Tax Credit, which gives 2.1 cents for every kilowatt-hour of electricity produced by a wind turbine during the first ten years of operation. The cost of the Production Tax Credit is expected to reach more than $65 billion before its scheduled phase out in 2029.
Thanks to such subsidies, the situation in Texas has deteriorated so far that on some days the price of wind power falls so low that generators have an incentive to offer their power at any price above zero. Hence, generators sometimes respond by offering negative prices — effectively offering to pay customers to take their power for next to nothing.
Like wind, utility-scale solar power benefits from a generous tax break. The Investment Tax Credit for solar power reduces tax revenue by billions of dollars each year. Solar's low cost has caused a number of coal, gas and nuclear plants to close before it is economic for them to do so.
Wind and solar power increase the costs of conventional generation. This is because electric power systems need conventional generating technologies to back up and fill in for intermittent renewables, which aren't of much use when the wind isn't blowing and the sun isn't shining.
A combination of energy sources — coal, natural gas, nuclear, and renewables — is the core strength of the electric power system. It serves as a hedge against price volatility and supply disruptions. But this fuel and technological diversity is at risk. Left unaddressed, it could produce power shortages. The best way to deal with it is for Congress to end subsidies for wind and solar power.
Barry Butterfield, of Omaha, is a retired engineer and member emeritus of the American Nuclear Society. An essay offering a counterpoint view on this issue will appear in the opinion section of The World-Herald on Sunday.

OWH: Tech security

I want to thank Gov. Ricketts for banning the TikTok app on State of Nebraska election devices due to security concerns. I am hoping the governor is not playing politics and will also ban all cell phones in Nebraska that contain a Huawei chip now that President Trump signed an executive order banning government agencies from using telecommunications equipment that pose a risk to national security.
Joseph Anania, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 8/16: Strange session at Capitol beset by partisanship, ongoing fighting

"And the turtles, of course – all the turtles were free. As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be." – Dr. Seuss, "Yertle the Turtle"
After a frantic 17 days that began harmoniously but quickly descended into false starts, finger pointing – and not necessarily by the index finger – and a filibuster from the aforementioned Dr. Seuss classic, a Nebraska Legislature session unlike any other concluded Thursday.
What a relief.
Familiarity may breed contempt, and the compressed calendar and late nights of this strange summer session did just that among senators. But one has to wonder what could have been accomplished had more energy been dedicated to legislating rather than lashing out at one another.
The amount of time spent bickering left far too many bills to die on the vine, including Hail Mary efforts to address the two most consequential news stories of the four-month layoff – the COVID-19 pandemic

in Nebraska meatpacking plants and protests against police violence. Though time wasn't on the side of this legislation, many senators eschewed good-faith efforts to even consider these items.
Sure, the story isn't entirely one of dysfunction; the last-minute flurry of action included some of the productivity Nebraskans expect from their lawmakers.
A handful of important bills the Journal Star editorial board has supported – added transparency for executions; name, image and likeness rights for college athletes; and partial exemption of military retirement benefits, to name three – were passed, along with the budget, in the final days.
The so-called "grand bargain" also proved that compromise isn't dead yet in the Legislature, either. Lawmakers' ability to work together to increase property tax relief and create a new business incentives program while on a strict deadline shows our hope for improvement isn't entirely misplaced. (Reminder: Part of something is infinitely more than all of nothing.)
Such an accomplishment is made all the more impressive considering the chaos that reigned and prompted Speaker Jim Scheer to invite Gov. Pete Ricketts to address the full body a few days into the renewed session.
The level of acrimony and absurdity displayed by senators – best illustrated by Sen. Andrew La Grone trivializing an important parole-reform bill with his reading of "Yertle the Turtle" – indicates the need for senators to think deeply about how to govern effectively and in the dignified manner befitting them as elected officials.
Now that, like the turtles liberated from the tyrannical Yertle's rule, the senators are free of the session, Nebraskans must demand they take a long, hard look at how business is done in the Capitol. Pettiness and partisanship of this nature are unbecoming of the last bastion of legislating without party labels.
Since senators heard their share of Dr. Seuss on the floor, let us offer just one more line from "The Lorax" as they consider how to work for the betterment of all Nebraska come January: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

LJS: Mentally ill need attention

It seems that society is perfectly happy to not care about those less fortunate. We have no information about the number of infections and deaths in the regional centers or other psychiatric facilities.
DHHS says nothing, government says nothing, the centers themselves say nothing and the ACLU does nothing. Lots of people are worried, file lawsuits and complain about jails and prisons and COVID-19 there, but not one peep about those in psychiatric hospitals.
The people who by no choice of their own ended up in an institution ended up there because of a health problem. Some are so extremely depressed, some have serious anxiety disorders, some have other psychiatric illnesses, but no one chose to have mental illness.
One in five Americans will experience mental illness in their lifetime, and one in 25 Americans will experience serious mental illness in their lifetime, the type that could lead them to a psychiatric hospital. But no one seems to care.
Like always, those with mental illness are seen as useless, as a drain on society, to be disposed of. Well, we are fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunt, uncles. We are your coworkers, friends, neighbors.
We are important, and those of us who need extra treatment should be cared about as much as someone who chose to rob a bank. We need to find out the status, and we need to care about and help those who are hospitalized and make sure they are safe.
Arianna Brandstetter, Lincoln

OWH: Nebraska and Iowa Democrats prepare for an unconventional convention

WASHINGTON — Forget about that traditional scene where delegates in funny hats wave signs and dance awkwardly as a red, white and blue balloon shower falls from the rafters.

Fired-up Democrats can instead look forward to downloading a variety of themed social media covers and Zoom backgrounds to display their support for former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif.

The coronavirus pandemic means that this week's Democratic National Convention will be unlike any before.

And delegates will largely experience it like any member of the general public would — parked at home in front of television sets and laptop screens.

"Everything is virtual," said Nebraska Democratic Party Chairwoman Jane Kleeb.

Republicans will have their own largely remote session next week as they make their pitch to voters for another four years of President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence.

But this week, Democrats get the spotlight to tout their own champions.

Yet previous discussions about in-person watch parties and regional satellite events have been abandoned.

The Biden team has made its critique of Trump's pandemic response a central theme, after all, so they are taking an abundance of caution when it comes to their own campaign activities.

But there will be a slate of virtual events nationally and locally.

Nebraskans kick things off Sunday night with a Welcome to the Heartland session featuring remarks by Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., and Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly.

Virtual watch parties for the delegations are scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday evenings before the main speakers.

Nebraska's Wednesday session will be hosted by Symone Sanders, who grew up in Omaha and is now a top adviser to Biden.

Sen. Jon Tester, D-Montana, will address Nebraska delegates during Thursday night's event.

"A third-generation dirt farmer, Senator Tester has worked with Joe Biden since being elected to the U.S. Senate in 2006," according to a Biden campaign summary.

The week will include virtual roundtable discussions on election integrity, infrastructure and other topics, as well as cyberspace versions of the rural caucus, the Hispanic caucus, the LGBTQ caucus and so forth.

Delegates, as well as members of the public, can RSVP for those sessions on the convention website.

The highest-profile remarks will come in the 8 to 10 p.m. block every night, with speeches by Democratic superstars such as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former President Barack Obama.

Kleeb noted that the full list of speakers during the week covers a range of ideological leanings.

"That is, I think, going to be the clear message that is sent during the convention," she said. "We welcome moderate, conservative and progressive Democrats and all the independents and Republicans who continue to be frustrated with Trump's leadership."

Kleeb said Nebraska Democrats are also working on a "tribal land acknowledgment ceremony" at some point during the week, but details of that event were still being finalized.

The Iowa delegation will have its own virtual watch parties: Former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg will host one Wednesday night, while Rep. Cheri Bustos, D-Ill., will host Thursday's.

There will also be voter activation stations across Iowa where people can pick up campaign materials such as yard signs, register to vote, request a mail-in ballot and volunteer to help on campaigns at all levels.

Locally, one such station will be open from 3 to 7 p.m. Wednesday at Bayliss Park in Council Bluffs.

By Joseph Morton

OWH: Chuck Hagel, other Republican critics of Trump will back Biden during Democratic convention

WASHINGTON — Next week's Democratic National Convention will feature Republican critics of President Donald Trump, and one of them should be familiar to Nebraskans.

Former Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., says Trump's performance in office is a big part of why he's officially endorsed presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden.

"I think Donald Trump has done great disservice and damage to this country, the institutions of governance," he told The World-Herald. "I think he has been corrupt in how he has used his office for his own personal gains."

Hagel cited personal behavior such as refusing to release his tax returns and a penchant for insulting tweets as evidence that Trump has "degraded the office of the presidency." But he also criticized Trump's policies on agriculture, trade, the federal budget deficit and the coronavirus pandemic. He slammed Trump's approach to foreign affairs, such as pulling out of international agreements and pushing to withdraw U.S. troops from Germany.

"How does that enhance our security and our alliances?" Hagel said.

Hagel recently recorded a video in support of Biden to be played during next week's largely virtual nominating convention.

He and Biden traveled around the world together during their time in the Senate. And when Biden served as President Barack Obama's vice president, Hagel was the secretary of defense.

"I've worked with him and known him closely for over 20 years," Hagel said. "I know what he's about. I know the kind of human being he is. I know the honesty he brings, the competency he brings."

This isn't the first time Hagel has crossed the aisle to support a Democrat for office. He backed another one-time Senate colleague, Nebraska Democrat Bob Kerrey, in his 2012 Senate campaign against Republican Deb Fischer.

Top GOP officials at the time downplayed the impact of Hagel's endorsement by noting that he had alienated many Republicans with his sharp criticism of President George W. Bush's handling of the Iraq War and pointed questioning of Sarah Palin's fitness to be the 2008 GOP vice presidential nominee. Fischer went on to win that Senate race by a double-digit margin.

Trump campaign officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Hagel's backing of Biden, but Nebraska Republican Party Executive Director Ryan Hamilton questioned its effect.

"I am not sure a single individual will be persuaded one way or another by this endorsement," he said. "Secretary Hagel is an ex-Obama administration official who has been out step with the party for the better part of a decade, and Republicans do not look to him for cues."

While Nebraska is not expected to be competitive overall in the presidential race, the state splits three of its Electoral College votes by congressional district.

Democrats hope they can re-create the 2008 "Blue Dot," in which Obama won the Omaha-based 2nd District's Electoral College vote.

At the time, Democrats took to calling the city "Obamaha," and they have recently floated a new Biden-focused moniker: "Jomaha."

Nebraska Democrats are also touting poll numbers that suggest Biden could compete in the state's 1st District as well.

Hagel's support for Biden seems to track the thinking of John Kasich. Ohio's former Republican governor is scheduled to speak during the convention as the Biden campaign seeks to demonstrate broad appeal.

Hagel said he disagrees with Biden's policies in plenty of areas and noted that their Senate voting records were worlds apart. And although Biden ran as one of the more moderate candidates in the Democratic primaries, Hagel acknowledged that a President Biden would be under pressure from the

more liberal elements of his party to skew hard to the left.
But Hagel said that's the challenge of governing and that Biden is capable of building a governing coalition that includes Republicans.
"I don't know anybody in the political world today who understands that better than Joe Biden, who has more practice at it, who has had more experience at it than Joe Biden," he said.
While he served in a Democratic administration and has backed Democrats for office, Hagel said he remains a registered Republican.
"And I'm hoping that the Republican Party will someday get back to where it was when I joined the Republican Party and voted for a Republican president and a Republican congressman in 1968 sitting on top of an armored personnel carrier in Vietnam," he said. "I've seen an erosion of Republican principles over the years."
Hagel said the party has lost touch with its roots in fiscal discipline, free trade and international engagement.
"There is no Republican Party," he said. "There's a Trump party. And the Republicans have essentially enabled Trump to do what he's done to really damage this country the last 3½ years. That's, again, what led me particularly to support Biden. Because I don't think this country can take another four years of this guy. Our international standing can't, our defenses can't, our relationships can't, our trade can't."
By Joseph Morton

OWH: Pandemic relief remains in limbo as Congress leaves town for recess

WASHINGTON — It appears Congress is off until September with no deal in sight on another round of pandemic relief measures.
Democrats have criticized Senate Republicans for not sticking around until they had at least voted on a proposal, but Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., put the blame on House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.
The House has been in session only a handful of weeks in recent months, after all, he noted.
"We're in the middle of a pandemic and we've been in session for five weeks out of six months," Bacon said. "It's wrong."
No deal means no relief funding for the Postal Service, which faces a virus-related shortfall and an impending surge of mail-in ballots. President Donald Trump has made no secret of his resistance to additional Postal Service funding, saying blocking the money will make it harder to do mail-in ballots. Trump has repeatedly suggested that those ballots would be susceptible to fraud.
Bacon said Trump is right to push states such as New York to improve their mail-in balloting.
But he also said that he supports the Postal Service and doesn't like hearing those of either party casting doubt on the legitimacy of U.S. elections. He said Democrats have politicized Russia's attempts at interference, for example.
"Both sides are guilty of maybe hyping up risks to our election system," Bacon said. "I don't think it's good."
In any event, welcome to the 2020 edition of August recess. Lawmakers have departed Capitol Hill as both parties prepare for their every-four-years presidential nominating conventions.
This year's gatherings will take place largely over Zoom, however, thanks to the coronavirus.
Democrats go first this week with a line-up of virtual events.
Presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden announced his running mate last week — Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., who was swiftly subjected to the kind of "birther" attacks that were previously directed against President Barack Obama.
Bacon criticized those attacks on Harris.
"We are better than this," Bacon said. "Though I greatly disagree with most of her political views, I'm

proud I'm in a country where individuals from any race and either sex can achieve the highest goals."
In other news:

Can I suggest couples counseling?

With the stimulus talks at a stalemate, President Donald Trump sought to enact some pandemic relief measures all on his own by way of executive actions.

That earned him a rebuke from Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., who said that kind of executive lawmaking is "unconstitutional slop."

Trump fired back on Twitter, calling Sasse a Republican In Name Only who needed his endorsement to win his primary earlier this year.

Sasse responded with his own, longer statement on Twitter reiterating his case against the actions.

The White House pushed back on the criticism in part by defending Trump's authority to take those measures. Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany, for example, cited specific statutes related to them.

"What we are doing is entirely within the executive capacity of the president," McEnany said.

Helping ethanol

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, has pushed to get additional aid for agriculture into the next pandemic relief bill, but he noted last week that most of the spotlight has been on unemployment benefits, school aid and assistance to state and local governments.

"If there was an agreement on those three things I think there would soon be an agreement that we ought to have $20 billion for agriculture," Grassley told reporters.

Whether part of that agriculture-related money would be clearly tabbed for ethanol is unclear, Grassley said.

But as long as it gets passed lawmakers could plead with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to allocate a portion of that money for the biofuel.

"I think we're justified in pleading for help for ethanol because the federal government has been helping oil by putting surplus oil in the strategic petroleum reserve," Grassley said.

By Joseph Morton

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