From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 12-23-20
Date: Wednesday, December 23, 2020 8:27:22 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Dec 2020	4.24	-22.00	08:15
Corn	Oct 2021	3.80	-40.00	08:12
Milo	Dec 2020	5.31	85.00	08:15
Milo	Oct 2021	4.25	5.00	08:12
Soybeans	Dec 2020	11.89	-69.00	08:14
Soybeans	Oct 2021	10.00	-90.00	08:13
Wheat	Dec 2020	5.20	-64.00	08:15
Wheat	Jul 2021	5.29	-60.00	07:58

TV and Radio
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NCN: Sidney Regional Medical Center receives initial shipment of COVID-19 vaccine
NET: Frakes Says New Prison Needed; Some Are Skeptical
KSNB: Staff working hard to provide joy to residents of Veteran's home

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OWH: $900 billion coronavirus relief bill passes with big support from Nebraska, Iowa members

AP: EXPLAINER: Are new coronavirus strains cause for concern?

AP: No immediate ruling after hearing on fate of DACA program

NTV: Governor answers concerns regarding St. Francis ministries financial stability

Concerns have grown over the financial stability of St. Francis ministries - a Kansas foster care contractor. In 2019, the agency was awarded a $197 million, five-year contract by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to oversee the care of abused and neglected children in the Omaha area.

Governor Pete Ricketts was asked if the state should be sending money to St. Francis when their financial stability is under question.

Ricketts said they have spoken with the CEO, William Clarke of St. Francis ministries.

He said they have talked to St. Francis a number of times regarding their financials and have received information from them.

Ricketts said they will continue to monitor St. Francis to make sure that they can provide the services they promised to provide for the state.

He said, "We will continue to make sure we are working with them. So, that if we are providing additional resources to them to take care of our children and families here in the state, that we are doing it in a way that makes sure that they are sustainable moving forward.

He also said they have discussed with St. Francis of how to meet staffing needs. Currently, St. Francis is not meeting the workers per number of cases ratio.
The governor said they are having talks with DHHS about what they should to if the agency goes out of business and can't provide those services.

OWH: Former CEO of child welfare contractor defends spending $80K on Cubs tickets

LINCOLN — Buying thousands of dollars' worth of Chicago Cubs tickets was a "unique fundraising opportunity" for the Kansas-based nonprofit that oversees child welfare cases in the Omaha area, according to its former president and CEO.
The Rev. Bobby Smith, who led St. Francis Ministries until late October, took issue with reports about the purchase in a statement to the World-Herald Tuesday.
"While I am disheartened by inaccurate and uninformed reporting, I remain confident that my team and I were sincere in our efforts to transform St. Francis into a nationally and internationally respected organization resembling its earliest missional context; one focused on the needs of vulnerable children and families regardless of geography," he said.
Smith sent the statement in response to reports of financial mismanagement on his watch at St. Francis. The embattled agency holds a $197 million, five-year contract to oversee the care of abused and neglected children in Douglas and Sarpy Counties.
The reports Smith cited include one submitted to Kansas child welfare officials by a whistleblower, who said the agency had to borrow to pay foster parents while spending money on such things as $80,000 worth of Cubs tickets. The ticket purchase occurred at the same time that St. Francis was taking on the Nebraska contract last year.
In his statement, Smith said a benefactor offered St. Francis a "revenue opportunity." If St. Francis advanced $65,000 for postseason tickets, he said, the agency could sell the tickets on the secondary ticket market for more than face value. Smith said the benefactor returned the $65,000 when the Cubs did not make the playoffs.
The other $15,000 worth of tickets, he said, were offered to community leaders to develop "strategic relations" after St. Francis opened a Chicago office in 2018. Although Gov. Pete Ricketts' family owns the Chicago Cubs, the governor's spokesman has said he did not know about the ticket purchase before it emerged in media reports.
Smith also disputed that he was ever a "personal, business partner" with Bill Whymark, the president of WMK Research.
The whistleblower report said a now-removed webpage identified Whymark and Smith as co-owners of an IT company. The report said that Whymark had been hired to write a new suite of software for the agency but that no software had been delivered in a year. The agency also suffered a major systems crash after outsourcing its IT department to him.
An internal investigation launched by the St. Francis board in October reported a "potential conflict of interest" between the two men. It also said that Whymark billed for an "improbable amount of time" and that Smith spent a few minutes or less to review thousands of dollars of invoices from him.
The internal investigation also said Smith charged more than $469,000 on a pair of agency credit cards, including on pricey hotels, meals at five-star restaurants, iTunes purchases, airline upgrades, charitable gifts and more than $3,000 at a Chicago men's clothing store touted as "specializing in luxury European designer apparel."
In his statement, Smith said that "to transform an organization requires tireless effort and commitment. I accepted the demand of being on the road for days and weeks every month — travel that incurred thousands of dollars spent on airlines, hotels, meals and donor development activities."

An interim president was named when the investigation began. It ended last month with the official departure of the agency's top two officials — Smith and Tom Blythe, who had been chief operating officer.
The agency is losing money on its Nebraska contract, on which it dramatically underbid the previous provider. An internal investigation said Smith was warned that the contract would lose money, now estimated at $27 million for the current fiscal year and $7.4 million the previous budget year. Ricketts said Monday that the state is in negotiations with St. Francis over financial and other issues, as some state lawmakers call for a special legislative investigation.
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Starting Jan. 1, Nebraska drivers to get a break from record-high gas taxes

LINCOLN — Nebraska drivers will start the new year with a tax break.
Starting Jan. 1, the state motor fuels tax will drop to 28.7 cents per gallon, according to the Nebraska Department of Revenue. That's down 4.5 cents per gallon from the record high level of the last six months.
The drop reflects a return to more normal driving patterns and, as a result, a more normal gas tax level. State officials increased the tax by 3.9 cents per gallon on July 1 to offset a pandemic-driven loss of revenues in the state's road-building fund.
The State Highway Trust Fund gets money from three sources: gas taxes paid at the pump, sales taxes paid on motor vehicles and a portion of each motor vehicle registration.
Gas tax revenues dropped after Gov. Pete Ricketts imposed travel restrictions and pushed for people to stay home to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Sales taxes and motor vehicle registration revenues dropped because county offices were closed and drivers were given more time to register their vehicles. That triggered a state law that raises or lowers part of the gas tax, called the variable tax, to keep revenues in balance with the roads budget. Adjustments are made every six months.
Lower-than-expected revenues early in the year pushed up the variable tax, while the drop for next year reflects a return to more normal revenues.
Nebraska's total gas tax also includes a fixed tax, set by state lawmakers at 16.3 cents per gallon, and a wholesale tax, determined by the price of fuel. The wholesale tax dropped to 8.5 cents per gallon, down from 9.5 cents currently.
By Martha Stoddard

AP: Nebraska education leaders approve of Biden's pick

President-elect Joe Biden has chosen Miguel Cardona, Connecticut's education chief and a lifelong champion of public schools, to serve as education secretary.
The selection delivers on Biden's promise to nominate someone with experience working in public education and would fulfill his goal of installing an education chief who stands in sharp contrast to Betsy DeVos, the current secretary. Democrats see her as an opponent of public schools, whereas Cardona is a product of them.
Biden's decision drew praise from public school advocates and the nation's major teachers unions. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, called Cardona a "trusted partner" who will reverse four years of "disaster" under DeVos.
The selection met with approval from two Nebraska education leaders Tuesday.
"Having an educator as a secretary of education is definitely a boost to the moral of our hardworking educators after four long years of Secretary DeVos actively working to destroy public education," said

Maddie Fennell, executive director of the Nebraska State Education Association.
Fennell said she looks forward to working with him. She noted his two decades of experience as a public school educator, beginning as an elementary school teacher.
“In addition, his perspective as an educator of color is important as we seek to recruit and retain more teachers, especially teachers of color, into our profession,” she said.
Nebraska Commissioner of Education Matt Blomstedt said Cardona has advocated for getting children back into in-person learning during the pandemic.
“He’s been a big proponent of that,” Blomstedt said.
His position aligns with that of Blomstedt and Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, who have advocated for a return to in-person learning, as long as it could be done safely.
Blomstedt said Cardona will bring a strong education background to the role.
Cardona understands the state leadership role in education policy and the current needs for state and local education during the pandemic, Blomstedt said.
“His elementary background will be a strength as we seek to address the academic recovery needs for early learning as we seek to address literacy and numeracy,” he said. “I know that Miguel will be a strong partner for Nebraska and all states.”

Neb Farmer: New pulse crop checkoff begins in July

Rol Rushman and his son, Tyler, of Dalton, Neb., have been raising certified field pea seed since 2011.
About three years ago, Rushman and several other field pea producers participated in meetings that gauged the interest in developing a state checkoff and commission dedicated to research and development in the growing markets for pulse crops.
A dream of pulse crop growers in the state came to fruition in July when Nebraska’s Unicameral voted 44-0 in favor of LB 803, Venango state Sen. Dan Hughes' “Dry Pea and Lentil Resources Act,” establishing a five-member Nebraska Dry Pea and Lentil Commission.
The commission will consist of one member from each of Nebraska’s three production districts, as well as two at-large members, all with at least five years of experience in growing these crops. The law also authorizes the collection of a 1% excise tax on the net market value of dry peas and lentils sold through commercial market channels within the state, beginning on July 1, 2021.
Faculty and the administration at the University of Nebraska have worked with growers on the passage of this legislation. Now that it has passed, UNL also is interested in partnering with growers to see how they can help grow the industry.
“At one time, the price on peas was around $8.50 per bushel,” Rushman says. “There definitely was a swing in interest, with demand coming from India and China.”
A few more acres were planted to field peas because of the high prices, but lately, demand has been lower, and market prices have dipped. “There are still good markets that have been active, buying peas in the offseason,” Rushman says.
Revenue coverage
The establishment of the commission, with members appointed by Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, will allow Nebraska to become a member of the National Pulse Crops Coalition, administered by the USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council/American Pulse Association.
Neighboring South Dakota, North Dakota and Montana all are members. The coalition helps provide equity in the industry, revenue-based crop insurance coverage and a seat on the national board. The Nebraska checkoff was a necessary component to the membership.
“This enables Nebraska growers to obtain revenue protection coverage through crop insurance,” Rushman says. “In the years with low prices or low yields, or both, this is a big deal.”

The new commission may create general state policies and programs related to the discovery, promotion and development of markets and industries for the use of dry peas, lentils, chickpeas or garbanzo beans, faba beans or lupins grown in the state. It also may adopt an education and publicity program, make grants and enter research contracts.

According to the law, the 1% checkoff will be levied and imposed on the grower at the time of sale or delivery. The first purchaser will collect the tax and remit it to the commission. The commission can adjust the levy after July 1, 2023, but it cannot be less than 1% or more than 2%.

"You have to treat peas differently than other crops," Rushman says. "There is a learning curve to growing them, but once you get set up, it works well."

He notes that like any legume, peas add nitrogen back to the soil and have other agronomic benefits, such as building organic matter.

"The real benefit," Rushman says, "is that they are a cool-season legume, while all the others are warm-season."

Nebraska Extension and funding from a North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program helped producers learn more about pulse crop production. In 2018, the combined acreage of field peas, lentils and chickpeas in the state increased to about 80,000 acres.

In addition to Rushman, Steve Tucker of Venango also worked for passage of the law.

By Curt Arens

NTV: Fischer helps pitch Offutt Air Force Base as SPACECOM's headquarters

A final pitch was made for Offutt Air Force Base to serve as the location for U.S. SPACECOM's headquarters, according to U.S. Senator Deb Fischer.

"I was proud to join Team Nebraska in making the case to Air Force leadership that Offutt should serve as the new home for Space Command. The patriotic men and women of Offutt as well as its strong support from the surrounding community make it an excellent candidate for such a critical mission," said Fischer.

This pitch follows Offutt Air Force Base being named as one of six finalists for the headquarters.

Along with Fischer, Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts, University of Nebraska President Ted Carter, 55th Wing Commander Col. Gavin P. Marks, Bellevue Mayor Rusty Hike, and Omaha Public Power District President & CEO Timothy J. Burke were part of the pitch.

Norfolk DN: Nursing home workers, residents should start getting vaccinated next week

Some 8,700 Nebraskans who mostly work in health care had been vaccinated for COVID-19 as of Monday morning, with plans to have the vaccines start being made available to pharmacies in the state next week for use in nursing homes.

Gov. Pete Ricketts said the state is "banking" 11,700 Pfizer vaccine doses scheduled for this week, as well as other doses that will be delivered to places like CVS and Walgreens for use at long-term care facilities.

"Just to be clear, we will not actually physically be taking delivery of those Pfizer vaccines this week. We will be banking them. The federal government will hold onto them, then they will distribute them directly to CVS and Walgreens and community pharmacies to be able to start that long-term care vaccine program the week of Dec. 28," Ricketts said Monday morning.

Ricketts made his comments during his last scheduled press conference of the year on the updates the state is doing to slow the spread of the coronavirus. The next similar scheduled press conference will be Monday, Jan. 4.

Ricketts said from what he has seen, more people are becoming willing to take the vaccine.

“As we see more of this information come out, I think people will get more comfortable,” he said. “But it does require us to do this type of education.”
Dr. Kevin J. Reichmuth, a pulmonologist in Lincoln, said polls indicate that there is an increase in people who are willing to take the vaccinations.
Nationally, there have been more than 600,000 people vaccinated, mostly health care workers, he said.
“The saying in public health is that vaccines don’t save lives, vaccinations do,” Reichmuth said. “So we have to get people vaccinated, and part of that is going to be educating and reassuring (and reeducating) as this goes.”
Reichmuth said he appreciates the decreasing numbers of people with the coronavirus and being hospitalized, which “is no small accident.”
That also translates into hospital beds. The governor said 36% of Nebraska hospital beds are available, in addition to 41% of intensive care units and 74% of ventilators, which are all improvements in recent weeks.
Reichmuth said the improvements came about because people — beginning in early November — started doing the right things from social distancing to masking and all the other tools that have been given.
There have been media reports that show a lot of emotion when health care workers get vaccinated, Reichmuth said.
“The reason you’re seeing that is because — as we all know — how long a trudge and how difficult this has been,” he said.
The vaccinations could finally put an end to it and put the country back into what might be considered “normalcy,” Reichmuth said.
“This is hope and light at the end of the tunnel, but we still have a long tunnel to go through,” he said. “We have some very tenuous times coming up in the next several months.”
Reichmuth said he took the vaccine a week ago, being on the front line. He and many other health care workers did this to be part of the “ultimate solution” to protect the community.
There are many myths and misinformation that have been given out, especially on social media. Reichmuth said the vaccines do not alter DNA, do not cause infertility and do not have a microchip or “5G antenna” in them.
“It is an amazing feat of medicine of science — like the governor said — that we have this within a year,” Reichmuth said.
Heath Boddy, president and CEO of the Nebraska Health Care Association, said there have been many celebrations that had been delayed or held without seniors who live in long-term facilities.
The vaccine represents a way out, Boddy said, and he appreciates the patience everyone has shown so far.
From avoiding large gatherings to wearing masks, it all helps to keep the virus out of the long-term care facilities.
“There will be better days ahead,” Boddy said. “We will be able to connect with our families again.”
By Jerry Guenther

LJS: As COVID-19 cases fall in Lancaster County, testing also on the decline

COVID-19 cases have plunged in Lancaster County over the past two weeks, dropping more than 50% from an all-time high of 2,112 the week ending Dec. 5 to 1,038 last week.
While it's clear from other data, such as hospitalizations and emergency room visits, that the virus seems to be retreating, one factor that likely is playing a role in the decline in cases is a huge decline in testing.
Last week, just less than 3,800 people got tested for COVID-19 in Lancaster County. That was down

almost 30% from the previous week and is the lowest weekly total since the first week of November.
Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Director Pat Lopez said Friday during the mayor's weekly coronavirus briefing that the drop is "concerning."
"It's something that we're continuing to monitor closely," Lopez said, noting that the testing decline is not just a local phenomenon.
According to the state's COVID-19 dashboard, testing numbers have declined over the past few weeks across Nebraska, although not as sharply as in Lancaster County.
Dr. Cliff Robertson, CEO of CHI Health, said the daily average of tests processed in its labs has dropped to levels similar to what it saw in July and August when cases statewide were much lower than they are now.
The good news is the positivity rate also has declined. At its peak in early November, Robertson said CHI Health labs were seeing a positivity rate above 35%. On Monday, that percentage was in the mid-teens.
"I think that's a good sign," he said.
The positivity rate statewide has dropped from about 17% on Nov. 14 to about 12% over the weekend.
That has not been the case in Lancaster County thus far, however. According to the local dashboard, the positivity rate has stayed steady at about 27% for the past three weeks, even as the number of tests has declined nearly 40%.
Bob Ravenscroft, vice president of advancement at Bryan Health, said the drop in the number of people seeking tests at its urgent care centers and drive-thru location has been so pronounced that Bryan is reevaluating the long-term future of the drive-thru testing operation that is set up at 19th and O streets.
Ravenscroft said he believes the drop in testing is a reflection of fewer people feeling sick or having symptoms, but he said he had no explanation for why the positivity rate remains elevated.
"The positivity rate is still very, very high," Ravenscroft said, which is an indication of a "very live and active virus."
"If you go back to early May, late April, a 28% positivity rate would have sent shivers down all of our spines," he said.
That's not the case now, however. While the Health Department kept the local COVID-19 risk dial in the red — its highest risk category — it did last week announce a loosening of local directed health measures that allowed bars without food service to reopen and also slightly loosened capacity restrictions.
Those decisions were made more on the strength of a decline in local hospitalizations, which stood at a six-week low of 86 on Friday, but jumped back above 100 this week.
The drop in cases along with the arrival of the first doses of COVID-19 vaccine last week have brought a sense of optimism among local officials that hasn't existed for months.
Ravenscroft said Bryan Health as of Tuesday had vaccinated more than 2,700 employees and providers and was scheduled to exhaust its supply of the Pfizer vaccine by the end of the day Wednesday.
At CHI Health, Robertson said about 5,300 people had been vaccinated so far, and the health system would be out of vaccine by the end of the day Tuesday.
Those vaccinations all occurred at the health system's larger hospitals in Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island and Kearney.
This week, employees at some of CHI Health's smaller hospitals, including ones in Nebraska City and Schuyler, are being vaccinated. The Schuyler hospital was among ones using the Moderna vaccine, which was approved for emergency use last week.
The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department said it received doses of the Moderna vaccine on Tuesday, after receiving doses of the Pfizer vaccine last week.
City officials said they've vaccinated more than 300 emergency medical technicians in Lincoln and Lancaster County and expect to finish with that group prior to the holidays.
Gov. Pete Ricketts said Nebraska was scheduled to get more than 32,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine

this week, and much of it was scheduled to go to health care facilities in rural areas, because it does not require the ultra-cold storage that the Pfizer vaccine does.
Other smaller hospital systems also started vaccinating employees with the Moderna vaccine this week, including Beatrice Community Hospital and Saunders County Medical Center.
By Matt Olberding

GII: CHI Health frontline health care workers give testimony about receiving COVID-19 vaccine

ACHI Health St. Francis nurse and Good Samaritan doctor, who were among the first CHI Health staff vaccinated for the coronavirus, shared their experiences Tuesday on a Zoom call with the media.
The two staff members were Aria Diehl, a registered nurse in the neonatal intensive care unit at St. Francis, and Dr. Jason Shuda, a hospitalist at Good Samaritan in Kearney. They were joined on the call by Dr. Cliff Robertson, CHI Health CEO.
Robertson said the 14 CHI hospitals in Nebraska and Iowa started the week with 192 patients who tested positive for the virus. That was down from 229 patients the prior week.
He said CHI Health had completed the first round of vaccinations by Tuesday. They have vaccinated about 5,300 of their 11,500 employees.
The first round of vaccinations was with the Pfizer vaccine. CHI Health has just received the Moderna vaccine.
As of Monday morning, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, 8,985 Nebraskans had received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine.
Robertson said all the CHI Health hospitals have been vaccinating their staffs, including St. Francis and Good Samaritan.
He said the next Pfizer shipment will be arriving Dec. 28.
“So far, the reactions to the vaccinations have been pretty minor,” Robertson said.
Joining Diehl and Shuda on the call were two other CHI staff members who were among the first to receive the vaccination.
Diehl said she was felling good after receiving the vaccine. She has had minor aches and some soreness in her arm.
“I am about a week out and I feel great and am still working,” she said.
Diehl received the vaccine Dec. 15, but didn’t go back to work until Dec. 18.
Shuda, who also received his vaccination on Dec. 15, said he is feeling “fantastic.”
“The only thing that has changed, now several days out from the vaccine, is my level of optimism for the nearing end of the pandemic,” he said.
Shuda said he experienced some minor soreness in his shoulder and mild body aches that lasted about 12 hours.
“I had just come off a week of night shifts and I had a headache, which I had a hard time determining whether it was from sleep deprivation or from the shot,” he said. “But it was gone by the next day as well. All in all, I felt great.”
When asked why he got the shot, Shuda said, “I think it is important to think of others and to think of my family and extended family, with some of them with preexisting conditions for chronic illnesses that would put them at risk.”
He said, as a health care provider, “It is hard to go to work every day and to go home without confining myself or quarantining myself continuously to be able to see some of them.”
Shuda said people keep bringing up how fast the vaccines were developed to fight the virus.
“But I think it is important to anyone who is on the fence to reiterate that the science was not rushed,”

he said. “We have a dire circumstance right now, globally, and we have the science.”
Shuda said the mRNA science has been around for 20-plus years. mRNA vaccines work by providing the genetic code for cells to produce viral proteins. Once the proteins, which don’t cause disease, are produced, the body launches an immune response against the virus, enabling the person to develop immunity.
“So, we just leveraged that science and with the financial assistance from the government to be able to put this out in a much quicker fashion than is typical and I am very thankful for that,” he said.
When asked what is his hope for 2021, Shuda said that with the approval of the vaccines it will lead to a widespread acceptance and we can roll it out in rapid fashion and as quickly as able to lessen the strain on the health care system and hopefully return to a more normal way of living again.”
“By next summer or fall, I would love to be able to do more of the things that bring me great joy aside from work,” Shuda said. “This is a step toward that.”
Shuda and his colleagues have been battling the virus now for nine months.
Diehl said receiving the vaccine was a relief for her after many months of caring for those with the virus.
“It was something that I felt I could help my patients and my coworkers,” she said. “It was just a relief and a step in the right direction. So, it was exciting.”
By Robert Pore

AP: Officials urge Nebraskans to remain vigilant in virus fight

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Health officials say it’s important to remain vigilant about social distancing to limit the spread of the coronavirus even though vaccines have started to be administered and the state’s virus numbers have improved recently.
Douglas County Health Director Adi Pour said the arrival of vaccines this month offers hope, but it will be some time before enough people have been vaccinated to make a difference in the pandemic.
“Until 60% to 70% of the community is vaccinated, you still need to wear the mask, you still need to have social distancing, you still need to take all of those precautions,” Pour said.
Over the past several weeks, the virus numbers have been improving in Nebraska. The rate of people being infected with the virus went from the fifth-highest in the nation early this month to the 29th-highest rate on Monday.
The state said the number of people hospitalized with the virus remained unchanged Monday at 582. That is significantly lower than the peak of 987 set on Nov. 20 although it is still more than 2.5 times higher than it was on Oct. 1.
Nebraska reported 721 new cases of the virus and 25 deaths Monday to give the state 157,103 cases and 1,511 deaths since the pandemic began.

OWH: Douglas County Jail sees jump in COVID cases

The Douglas County Correctional Center is seeing a jump in COVID-19 cases, according to a statement issued Tuesday evening.
In the last week, 12 staff members have tested positive, according to the statement. The county employs about 500 people at the jail and so far, 164 have tested positive.
Since the start of the month, 10 inmates have tested positive. The jail had 1,249 people behind bars as of Tuesday. Over the course of the pandemic, 100 inmates have tested positive.
Mike Myers, director of Douglas County Department of Corrections, said the recent cases are concerning but this outbreak is well below the one in August.
Four of the 29 housing units are on quarantine. In August, nine were on quarantine.

Fourteen total staffers are unable to work due to COVID-19 compared to 50 in August.
By Nancy Gaarder

LJS: Lancaster County reports 4 more COVID-19 deaths

Four more Lancaster County residents have died of the coronavirus and 189 more residents have contracted COVID-19, the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported Tuesday.
Health Department officials in a news release identified the deceased as a man in his 60s and two women in their 70s and 80s, all residents of long-term care facilities, and a man in his 90s who was hospitalized.
The deaths raised the local pandemic death toll to 141, and to date, 21,295 people have contracted the virus in Lancaster County.
Health Department officials have documented 6,307 recoveries from the virus.
On Tuesday, Lincoln hospitals cared for 90 patients, including 53 Lancaster County residents and eight people who were on ventilators.
The state reported 10 more deaths, raising the total to 1,521. The total of positive cases is 158,324, and 566 people are hospitalized.
By Riley Johnson

LJS: HHS backed down on allegations against former employee, attorney says

A former employee with the Department of Health and Human Services whose firing became part of a lawsuit filed last week says the allegations against him were untrue.
Proposed discipline against former Water Well Standards Program Manager Tom Christopherson regarding a state contract with Clean Well Technologies and alleged misuse of state funds was actually withdrawn and back pay issued to the 24-year employee, according to his attorney, Ryan Kunhart.
The allegations appear in a lawsuit filed by former Human Resources Director Theresa Hill, who claimed she suffered discrimination and harassment by the department based on sex, age and race, and that she was retaliated against for reporting that conduct.
Hill left the department in 2019, but most of the allegations in her lawsuit occurred in 2017 and 2018.
In the complaint, she accused HHS Chief Operations Officer Bo Botelho of being aware of alleged misconduct of Christopherson in procuring a $2 million contract with Clean Well Technologies and misusing state funds.
After the lawsuit was made public, Christopherson's attorney contacted the Journal Star to say the allegations against his client were not true.
Hill and Botelho were involved in 2017 and 2018 in overseeing the firing of a number of long-term department workers, and a number of others who resigned or retired at that time to get away from what they said was dysfunction in the agency under former CEO Courtney Phillips.
It appears Christopherson was one of those.
In April 2018, Christopherson received a notice of discipline from the state personnel system suggesting his employment should be terminated.
The four allegations were:
* He misrepresented his authority when speaking to a village board in 2016. That allegation was withdrawn early.
* He misused state funds in the amount of $123,000 for the benefit of private companies.
* He misused funds of about $800,000 in the Water Well Standards and Contractor Licensing for unallowable expenses.

* He failed to properly lead HHS' water well standards program.
Kunhart said his client fought the allegations and won, offering substantial evidence rebutting the allegations through two grievance procedures that were denied, and then a hearing before the state personnel board.
In the lawsuit, Hill said Christopherson's brother was a shareholder in Clean Well Technologies and had made claims that effectively barred other companies from winning the contract.
Kunhart said no company was barred from bidding, and it was thought six to seven companies would bid. Christopherson had recused himself from the bidding process, he said, because of his brother's involvement.
Christopherson had received a national award in 2017 for his work on the state water well standards program, his lawyer said, and four months later he was fired.
"Tom is a very principled person and he had a very successful career there," Kunhart said.
The department never offered evidence that Christopherson had misused $800,000, his attorney said. In fact, he had spending authority only up to $5,000, he said, and supervisors had signed off on all invoices.
The personnel hearing didn't get far, Kunhart said, as the attorney for the state right away agreed to withdraw the notice of discipline from Christopherson's personnel file and issue back pay through the day of the hearing. He had no evidence to offer at that time on the case, he said.
"So they bluffed," Kunhart said. "Tom was willing to fight and stand up for his character and he was exonerated. And to this day, we have still not seen any evidence that he misused state funds."
Besides back pay, Christopherson asked for salary he would have received from the date of the hearing to his retirement. It was denied, but he appealed the denial to the Nebraska Supreme Court.
Christopherson did not request reinstatement of his job. He now owns a consulting company, his attorney said.
By JoAnne Young

KETV: Family members voice concern with COVID-19 outbreak at Tecumseh Correctional Institution

TECUMSEH, Neb. —

Michael Garza says his son Chris tested positive for COVID-19 and is struggling to breathe. Garza's son Chris is an inmate at the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution.
"I'm very concerned about it, him and my brother both have it," said Garza. "It worries me a lot. I haven't heard anything from my son, I haven't heard anything from my brother."
Nebraska officials confirm 71 inmates at Tecumseh have the virus right now.
"Somebody needs to get in there and see just how bad they are, and if they need to be in a real hospital," said Garza.
A Nebraska corrections official sent KETV Newswatch 7 the following statement:
"With 71 positive cases out of 1036 inmates, the ratio of positive inmates to non-infected inmates is less than we have experienced at other facilities over the last six months. Inmates in TSCI (just like those in other facilities that have experienced an uptick in COVID cases) are housed together based on their status -- positive, symptomatic, and negative COVID results. We have dedicated medical staff at that facility as well as the NDCS medical director, who works with the warden and his senior leadership staff to ensure that inmates who are positive are identified quickly and placed into medical isolation, thereby reducing transmission of the virus. Each person is evaluated individually. Inmates who are positive are checked by medical staff twice a day. Those on quarantine status have their vitals taken once a day. If someone becomes symptomatic or it is suspected they might have COVID, we will offer testing to that inmate and others in the same housing area to determine if others are also positive. Staff who are in contact with

quarantined or medically isolated inmates are required to wear proper PPE to further reduce transmission of the virus. The strategies employed by NDCS to test, quarantine and isolate inmates has served us well with each outbreak. NDCS is taking all of the proper steps to limit spread of the virus and ensure that everyone, regardless of their COVID status, receives proper health care."

"It's really important to try to get control of the spread and make sure it doesn't spread out beyond those 71 people," said Inspector General of Corrections Doug Koebernick. "Identify who's positive and who's negative and then go from there to minimize it as much as possible."

Koebernick said the numbers aren't surprising based on community spread cases.

"It's just like the community," said Koebernick. "We've seen this surge in the community, so we're seeing more of a surge in the prison system as well."

By DaLaun Dillard

LJS: Initial funding in place for long-sought USDA research center at UNL

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln moved into position Tuesday to acquire a long-sought U.S. Department of Agriculture research center.

Tucked into the 2021 omnibus federal appropriations package that won congressional approval Monday night was $11.2 million in funding for the planning and design of a new USDA agricultural research service facility.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry of Lincoln said Nebraska Innovation Campus will be the site of the new center.

"As the ranking member on ag appropriations, and through tough negotiations, I am very pleased that a new USDA building for the Agricultural Research Service is slated for the Nebraska Innovation Campus at UNL," the 1st District congressman said.

"With this new funding, USDA will expand its strategic research investments in areas such as agricultural innovation and precision agriculture," he said.

"This effort aligns with the needs of our country and the university's agricultural research mission."

UNL hailed the congressional action and credited Fortenberry with its success.

"This project wouldn't have happened without his hard work and diligence in obtaining funding," UNL Chancellor Ronnie Green said.

"It's an incredible opportunity for partnership between UNL and USDA, fueling the future of agriculture and food production," he said.

The planning and design appropriation represented a vital first step in securing a long-sought USDA research center that originally had been eyed as a catalyst for rapid development of UNL's new Innovation Campus.

The decade-long effort was originally spearheaded by former Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson, who championed location of a $60 million USDA center at UNL's new research campus in 2010.

His effort collapsed when congressional Republicans led a successful effort to eliminate the use of legislative earmarks to fund specific projects.

When U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue visited Innovation Campus last September, Green worked in a plug for a USDA research center, noting that UNL is "a world leader in agriculture" and could provide "a key partnership" on ag research issues.

Fortenberry is the ranking Republican member of the House Appropriations Committee's subcommittee on agriculture, rural development and the Food and Drug Administration.

By Don Walton

LJS: UNL economic index climbs again in November

Nebraska’s leading economic indicator rose again during November, according to the most recent report from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
The leading indicator climbed by 0.61%, marking the fifth increase in the last six months.
Economist Eric Thompson, director of the Bureau of Business Research at UNL, said the increase in the index suggests the state's economy will grow through the middle of next year.
Five of the six components of the leading indicator improved during November.
Business expectations were solid, with respondents to the November Survey of Nebraska Business reporting plans to increase in employment over the next six months. There also was modest growth in manufacturing hours worked and building permits for single-family homes as well as a decline in initial claims for unemployment insurance and a decline in the value of the dollar, which makes U.S. exports cheaper.
By Matt Olberding

OWH: Nebraska's population growth slowest since 1989

Nebraska’s slow but steady population growth pulled back from its normal walking pace in 2020.
A demographic researcher said Nebraska’s low level of growth reflects some of the state’s root challenges in growing its population, not the coronavirus pandemic.
Population estimates released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that Nebraska grew by just under 5,000 people from July 2019 to July 2020 — or just about one-quarter of 1%.
David Drozd, research coordinator at the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Center for Public Affairs Research, said the growth was the smallest gain and the lowest rate of increase since 1989 for Nebraska.
Drozd attributed the relatively small growth to a slowing of the state’s birth rate and its increasing number of deaths as baby boomers age. Plus, he said, Nebraska isn’t gaining as much population from international immigration and still loses people on net to other states.
Drozd said the pandemic is largely not incorporated into the new census estimates. The model that the Census Bureau uses to produce the estimates uses data, such as births and tax records, that wouldn’t have changed in the time period the bureau analyzes, he said.
The new population estimates are the last annual numbers before release of the full 10-year census count, which the Census Bureau will make public next year.
While Nebraska’s growth has slowed, other states are in a similar position.
Drozd said 20 states had their lowest annual growth of the last decade in the 2020 figures. A total of 16 states lost population in the 2020 numbers.
For the full decade, Nebraska’s growth rate ranks 20th best among the states.
That bodes well for Nebraska when seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are apportioned after the full 2020 population count. With that growth, Drozd said Nebraska is in no danger of losing one of its three congressional seats.
In total, Nebraska is estimated to have a population of 1.937 million.
By Jeffrey Robb

LJS: Census: Nebraska's population growth slows to three-decade low

Nebraska's population growth continued to slow this year, hitting a low not seen since the 1980s.
Census data released Tuesday shows the state had an estimated 1,937,552 people as of July 1, up about 5,000 from 2019.
The 2019 figure was actually revised down by more than 1,800 people, meaning the past year's growth was even more anemic.

In fact, it was Nebraska's lowest year-to-year growth both in pure numbers and percentage since 1989, said David Drozd, research coordinator at the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
This year's number continues a trend of slowing population growth over the past several years. Up until 2017, Nebraska added anywhere from about 10,000-14,000 people each year, but that number dropped to about 8,500 in 2018, 7,000 last year and 5,000 this year.
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One is a decrease in births as people have fewer children and wait longer to have them, and an increase in deaths as the Baby Boomer generation ages. Though births still outnumber deaths in Nebraska, that gap has continued to shrink, and it did so over the past year.
Another factor is migration, which is declining. Drozd said more people tend to move to Nebraska when the national unemployment rate is higher. Over the past year, the gap between the state and national unemployment rate was at its lowest level in years, which means fewer people moved here for job-related reasons.
He noted that surrounding states such as Iowa, Kansas and Missouri saw growth rates that were lower than Nebraska's.
"Nebraska doesn't stand out" for its lack of growth, he said.
Actually, Nebraska did better than quite a few states. Drozd said 16 states had population declines, which is "quite a bit more than usual."
Based on the annual estimates, Nebraska remained as the 37th-largest state for the eighth straight year. It ranks just behind New Mexico and just ahead of Idaho.
By Matt Olberding

OWH: Omaha City Council replacement blogs about race, says COVID 'blown out of proportion'

An Omaha woman who was selected Tuesday to serve out the remainder of an outgoing City Council member's term suggested on her website that concerns about the coronavirus have been "blown out of proportion."
She also penned an essay on race in which she said White people want to know "why African Americans don't stop the adoration of gangs, crime and violence when they are the disproportionate victims of it."
Colleen Brennan, who works for an insurance marketing firm, won the support of five Omaha City Council members on Tuesday to fill the southwest Omaha District 5 seat currently held by Councilman Rich Pahls, who moves to the Nebraska Legislature in January.
Brennan, 49, told The World-Herald on Tuesday that much of her writing is meant to start hard conversations, and some of it is satirical.
She is scheduled to be sworn in Jan. 12 and will serve until June 6. Next spring, all seven council seats

and the mayor are up for election. Brennan, a registered Democrat, also plans to run for the District 5 seat in the officially nonpartisan election.

In her application to fill Pahls' seat, Brennan detailed her efforts in creating a proposal that led to a 2015 state law that provides insurance coverage to families with profoundly disabled children. One of her children, Matthew, was born with nonverbal autism and epilepsy and died in 2015.

She was given the National Parent Advocate of the Year Award by Autism Speaks, according to her application.

"I want my children and my community to see that government leadership does not have to be angry or partisan to be effective," Brennan wrote in the application. "As a mother of seven, I want to be an example of integrity, public service and putting the needs of others before my own."

Council members Ben Gray, Chris Jerram, Vinny Palermo and Pete Festersen joined Pahls in voting for Brennan. Councilwoman Aimee Melton voted for Don Rowe, and Councilman Brinker Harding voted for Jeff Moore. Seventeen people applied for the appointment, which required a simple majority.

Brennan's website includes nearly 60 blog posts that cover such topics as race relations, the coronavirus pandemic, the media and national politics. A post dated Sept. 21 about the virus details her family's experience contracting COVID-19.

"I fully appreciate the fact that people are dying, and I've studied the numbers and causal relationship in those deaths," the post reads. "And I am embarrassed by the incongruity between the media coverage of this illness and what is really happening.

" ... having experienced it for myself, I can tell you without reservation that the fear surrounding COVID is far more nasty than the illness itself," the post continued.

Asked about those comments, Brennan said she believes a lot of misinformation is circulating about the virus. She said that she is supportive of a mask mandate at this time and that people need to do everything they can to protect themselves. She said she doesn't support shuttering businesses.

"Is it blown out of proportion? It's not ... ," she said in an interview Tuesday. "The numbers are what they are. The numbers have increased."

On June 1, three days after the start of protests in Omaha that stemmed from the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Brennan posted "The Conversation on Race," in which she sought to "encapsulate" the conversation from the White and Black sides of the table.

Writing "from the African American side of the table," Brennan said Black people want Whites to understand the challenges and feelings of hopelessness that come from living in poverty. "They want White People to understand that becoming a gang banger, living a life of crime or becoming the mother of multiple children with multiple fathers is a byproduct of that hopelessness."

White people, Brennan wrote, want to know "why after 60 years of increasingly generous progressive social programs and affirmative action, the social and economic health of the African American community has gotten worse instead of better. They want to know why so many African American men show such disrespect for women and the children they create."

Brennan told The World-Herald that the issues she raises reflect what she's hearing from Black and White people. She said much of what she writes is intended to start a conversation.

Another post suggested that President-elect Joe Biden "carried the dead vote," in the 2020 election. Brennan said Tuesday that she often writes satirically.

No council members spoke about Brennan during Tuesday's meeting.

Contacted after Tuesday's vote, Pahls said that he wasn't aware of the posts and that Brennan now has five months to show voters "if she can fulfill the position or not." He said he wanted to see a woman fill his spot on the council and said he had previous positive experiences with Brennan.

Palermo also said he had not seen her website and said he doesn't agree 100% with any political figure. On his vote for her, Palermo said Brennan reached out to him about the appointment more than any

other candidate.
By Reece Ristau

OWH Editorial: Out of this difficult year, a spirit of hope can move Nebraska forward

One of Nebraska's most frightening weather disasters struck on Oct. 3, 2013. A set of tornadoes rampaged across the state's northeast region, obliterating homes and businesses. One twister's fury intensified to EF-4 status, unleashing winds that lashed out at 170 mph.

No one was killed, but people suffered injuries, and property damage was extensive. The town of Wayne suffered an especially devastating blow from the EF-4. At the Wayne Municipal Airport, a new terminal building and hangar were only days away from opening, but the tornado showed no mercy. It blasted the entire complex. Winds destroyed or heavily damaged six hangars, an office building and 15 private planes. The airport's rotating beacon was left a shambles. So was an important weather observation station.

As the tornado departed and people stepped out to survey the scene, they found that, essentially, all that remained of the airport were the concrete runways.

But as dismaying as the destruction was, it wasn't the end of the story.

Before long, the airport achieved a remarkable turnaround.

Through sound planning and coordination, the first runway reopened two months later. Because the insurance policy provided needed coverage, money became available to cover much of the cost of a $2.7 million rebuilding project to restore service.

By August 2014, the airport was back to full operation — and was rightly saluted as Nebraska Airport of the Year. And it's still going strong.

That recent history provides a a lesson for Nebraskans this terrible COVID year. Life can bring great pain and frustration, and the year 2020 most certainly has. Not every situation has a happy ending, it's true. But Nebraska's past so often provides hope.

The hope that springs from perseverance and community solidarity in the face of great challenge.

That's how Nebraskans moved forward during hard pioneer times. It's how Nebraska got through the Great Depression. It was the way forward from the farm crisis of the 1980s.

It's a story seen time and again when Nebraska communities suffer the lashing from a tornado or an assault from a flood: People join together and lift each other up. Because we're in this together.

And so the past can inform the future: Years ago a terrible tornado hit the people of Wayne. It was devastating. It was frightening. But people moved forward. In the end they showed that in Nebraska, hope can survive even in the face of the worst catastrophe.

This holiday season, let's hold onto a spirit of hope as we move out of this catastrophic year. Let's take that spirit into 2021, to lift us all up and achieve better times ahead.

OWH: Vaccine priorities

The time has come to bring some common sense and sanity to the priority of vaccine distribution. Health care workers and first responders should be at the top of the list. People over 65 with comorbidity should be next. The idea of a 25-year-old grocery clerk is just another CDC guideline that missed the mark. I sincerely hope Gov. Ricketts makes the state of Nebraska a benchmark for vaccine distribution and issues guidelines that let our senior citizens know that their lives matter.
Ralph M. Pree, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 12/23: Corrections issues just keep getting more complex

When we talk about overcrowding in our Nebraska Department of Correctional Services, our minds gravitate toward images of the Nebraska State Penitentiary in Lincoln or the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution, which hold between them more than 2,200 men in maximum and medium security custody.

Walls, bars, fences, guards. These are the things we see. And there are the people. The state pen and Tecumseh were designed to serve just under 1,700 incarcerated individuals, meaning those two facilities together are almost 30% over capacity.

We hear numbers like these from the correctional services' first-quarter report from 2020. We hear numbers like these discussed by legislators. And we hear them discussed by officials charged with adding prison capacity or reducing prison demand.

What we don't often hear is a first-person description of what life is like for those being rehabilitated and those doing the rehabilitating. In a story last week, "'There are so many drugs: Workers talk about dangers at Lincoln prison," Journal Star reporter JoAnne Young spoke with a former staffer at the Community Corrections Center-Lincoln. Young also talked with two current staffers and a person being held there who spoke anonymously. Their stories are concerning and point to the depth of issues facing the corrections department.

CCC-L, at 2720 W. Van Dorn St., in Lincoln, is designed to hold 460 people. It's almost 33% over capacity with 611. It represents the lowest level of custody; individuals there are on work detail or work release. Yet those who talked to Young cited widespread drug use, contraband and criminal activity among these people deemed closest to be ready to return to society. And their reports appear backed up in complaints received by Inspector General for Corrections Doug Koebernick.

Department of Correctional Services Chief of Staff Laura Strimple said staffing at the facility has increased and is adequate for the current population, a claim Young's sources disputed. Strimple also noted that addiction recovery – which many in CCC-L are wrestling with – can involve relapses.

It's true that rehabilitation isn't a straight shot. But the Department of Corrections owes society, the men and women it's charged to "correct" and its staffers the safest environment possible.

Speaking of the people in custody, one staffer's point would be disputed by no one: "I just want to see them get out and be with their families. I want them to be successful."

There are no easy and cheap solutions in corrections, but the issues at CCC-L need attention quickly. For the sake of the people it serves and the community surrounding it.

LJS: History won't look kindly on suit

Don Walton asked Gov. Ricketts whether he "supported the goal of" the Texas lawsuit to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. This was exactly the right question to ask, but the answer was a rhetorical dodge, the kind of "non-answer" that we expect from a politician whose main goal is to mislead the public.

Usually, we just wince and move on, but this is one of the most important political questions that has been asked in generations, and the people of Nebraska deserved a straight answer from the governor. And any non-answer or dodge of the question should be taken as a -- "Yes" -- Ricketts does support the idea of overthrowing the results of the 2020 election!

As for Attorney General Doug Peterson and Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, their position is clear; they both signed on to, and do support, the idea that millions of American voters should be disenfranchised, and the results of an election ignored, in order to perpetuate the minority government of Donald Trump over a majority of Americans.

Really? Peterson and Fortenberry may find that some Nebraskans support this position in the short run,

but in fact it is hard to conjure up any idea that is more anti-democratic and un-American than this. Peterson and Fortenberry have both shamed themselves and disgraced their high offices, and history, I can assure them, is not going to look kindly on this assault on America's democratic principles in the long run.
Marshall Lux, Lincoln

LJS: Leadership lacking from state

On Dec. 13, the well-respected journalist Nicholas Kristof reported a startling fact in the New York Times. If the 50 states in the U.S. were countries, Nebraska would rank 12th highest (of all 245) in per capita deaths from the coronavirus.
That means 12th worst in the world in deaths considering the size of its population. It makes me wonder where we would rank if masks had been mandated, especially in the past month when Nebraska deaths have skyrocketed.
Gov. Pete Ricketts, how do your explain your leadership (or lack of leadership) on this vital matter of public health to all Nebraskans?
Peter Levitov, Lincoln

LJS: Fischer says her AIR Act proposal protects Nebraska airports

Sen. Deb Fischer said Tuesday congressional approval of her AIR Act proposal to stabilize federal funding for airports during the economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic will "provide Nebraska airports with the certainty they need to plan for future projects."
"The outbreak of COVID-19 led to significantly fewer flights out of many Nebraska airports, which put them at risk of receiving far less federal infrastructure formula funding," Fischer said.
Fischer's bipartisan AIR Act proposal was included in the COVID-19 relief package approved by Congress on Monday.
The AIR Act will require the Federal Aviation Administration to calculate federal airport improvement program support funding for fiscal 2022 and fiscal 2023 based on either 2018 or 2019 enplanement numbers.
Numbers of travelers are down at airports across the country. In Lincoln, passenger numbers were down 80% in November from a year ago.
"The Lincoln Airport continues to look for ways to serve the needs of our patrons and community while simultaneously seeking to provide employment security for our team," Lincoln Airport Authority executive director David Haring said.
Fischer's effort will provide the revenue stability that helps protect both jobs and critical infrastructure, he said.
By Don Walton

OWH: $900 billion coronavirus relief bill passes with big support from Nebraska, Iowa members

Every member of the Nebraska and Iowa congressional delegations voted to approve the coronavirus relief measure, except one.
Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, did not vote.
The House approved the $900 billion relief package on a 359-53 vote Monday evening. The Senate approved the bill 92-6.

Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., said she was glad Congress came together to send relief to people who need it. She pointed to parts of the bill that help schools, hospitals and small businesses.
"While it took too long to respond and provide this latest assistance, it is important we were finally able to pass this bill," she said. "It proves we can still work together for the American people."
One of the bill's highlights is a stimulus check of up to $600 for most Americans. The bill also provides families up to $600 per child. Individuals earning $75,000 a year or less, as well as couples earning $150,000 or less, are eligible for the full checks. Individuals earning more than $87,000 won't receive checks.
The measure also extended the moratorium on evictions through January and added $25 billion in rent and mortgage assistance.
Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., criticized as "broken" and "crummy" the process Congress used to decide how it would spend money in the bill. He praised the decision to spend money on vaccine distribution and helping small businesses keep making payroll but criticized the design of direct payments, saying they didn't target people in need.
"This cash-cannon approach puts credit-seeking politicians ahead of targeted problem-solving," he said. "I voted for this imperfect bill during an emergency — but ... we've got a long way to go toward restoring some fiscal sanity."
Midlands members of Congress, including Reps. Don Bacon, R-Neb., and Cindy Axne, D-Iowa, said they were pleased to get at least some relief out the door.
Bacon, who represents the Omaha area, emphasized help for local businesses, including live entertainment venues "hurt by lockdowns and other restrictions." He has said a proposal by his Problem Solvers Caucus helped refocus relief talks.
Axne, who represents southwest Iowa, touted the direct payments, rental assistance and help for Iowa's biofuels industry.
Some Republicans highlighted how much of the bill's spending was brought forward from unspent funds in previous relief bills. About $325 billion of the $900 billion total was new spending, Bacon said.
Some congressional Democrats, as well as outgoing Republican President Donald Trump, said they wanted the new relief bill to provide more in direct payments.
Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., who represents much of eastern Nebraska, discussed the importance of additional unemployment benefits. Congress is funding an extra $300 a week for 11 weeks starting late this month.
Like each of the other members from Nebraska and western Iowa, Fortenberry supported continued funding for the Paycheck Protection Program, which offers loans to small businesses hurt by COVID-19.
"While we have made great progress in fighting through the pandemic, with large-scale vaccine distribution already in progress, many Americans are still hurting badly, necessitating additional federal support," he said.
Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb., who represents the sprawling, largely rural 3rd Congressional District, said the relief bill took a "conservative approach to keeping workers employed."
He said he was pleased that it included his work to help rural health care clinics., saying Congress needed to "empower local health care providers to meet the needs of local citizens, both rural and urban."
Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, said he was glad that the bill would help people needing unemployment benefits while also making sure that states do a better job of ensuring that the people receiving those benefits are obtaining them legally.
"The pandemic is still far from over," he said. "But there is a light at the end of the tunnel."
By Aaron Sanderford

AP: EXPLAINER: Are new coronavirus strains cause for concern?

Reports from Britain and South Africa of new coronavirus strains that seem to spread more easily are causing alarm, but virus experts say it's unclear if that's the case or whether they pose any concern for vaccines or cause more severe disease.

Viruses naturally evolve as they move through the population, some more than others. It's one reason we need a fresh flu shot each year.

New variants, or strains, of the virus that causes COVID-19 have been seen almost since it was first detected in China nearly a year ago.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced new restrictions because of the new strain. Several European Union countries and Canada were banning or limiting some flights from the U.K. to try to limit any spread.

Here's what is known about the situation.

WHAT'S CONCERNING ABOUT THE RECENT STRAIN FOUND IN ENGLAND?

Health experts in the U.K. and U.S. said the strain seems to infect more easily than others, but there is no evidence yet it is more deadly.

Patrick Vallance, the British government's chief scientific adviser, said that the strain "moves fast and is becoming the dominant variant," causing over 60% of infections in London by December.

The strain is also concerning because it has so many mutations — nearly two dozen — and some are on the spiky protein that the virus uses to attach to and infect cells. That spike is what current vaccines target.

"I'm worried about this, for sure," but it's too soon to know how important it ultimately will prove to be, said Dr. Ravi Gupta, who studies viruses at the University of Cambridge in England. He and other researchers posted a report of it on a website scientists use to quickly share developments, but the paper has not been formally reviewed or published in a journal.

HOW DO THESE NEW STRAINS OCCUR?

Viruses often acquire small changes of a letter or two in their genetic alphabet just through normal evolution. A slightly modified strain can become the most common one in a country or region just because that's the strain that first took hold there or because "super spreader" events helped it become entrenched.

A bigger worry is when a virus mutates by changing the proteins on its surface to help it escape from drugs or the immune system.

"Emerging evidence" suggests that may be starting to happen with the new coronavirus, Trevor Bedford, a biologist and genetics expert at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, wrote on Twitter. "We've now seen the emergence and spread of several variants" that suggest this, and some show resistance to antibody treatments, he noted.

WHAT OTHER STRAINS HAVE EMERGED?

In April, researchers in Sweden found a virus with two genetic changes that seemed to make it roughly two times more infectious, Gupta said. About 6,000 cases worldwide have been reported, mostly in Denmark and England, he said.

Several variations of that strain now have turned up. Some were reported in people who got them from mink farms in Denmark. A new South African strain has the two changes seen before, plus some others. The one in the U.K. has the two changes and more, including eight to the spike protein, Gupta said. It's called a "variant under investigation" because its significance is not yet known.

The strain was identified in southeastern England in September and has been circulating in the area ever since, a World Health Organization official told the BBC on Sunday.

WILL PEOPLE WHO HAD COVID-19 FROM AN OLD STRAIN BE ABLE TO GET THE NEW ONE? WILL IT UNDERMINE VACCINES?

Probably not, former U.S. Food and Drug Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said Sunday on CBS's "Face the Nation."
"Unlikely," Gupta agreed.
President-elect Joe Biden's surgeon general nominee, Vivek Murthy, said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" that there's "no reason to believe that the vaccines that have been developed will not be effective against this virus as well."
Vaccines produce wide-ranging responses by the immune system beyond just those to the spike protein, several experts noted.
The possibility that new strains will be resistant to existing vaccines are low, but not "inexistent," Dr. Moncef Slaoui, the chief science adviser for the U.S. government's vaccine distribution effort, said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union."
"Up to now, I don't think there has been a single variant that would be resistant," he said. "This particular variant in the U.K., I think, is very unlikely to have escaped the vaccine immunity."
Bedford agreed.
"I'm not concerned" because a lot of changes in the genetic code would probably be needed to undermine a vaccine, not just one or two mutations, Bedford wrote on Twitter. But vaccines may need fine-tuned over time as changes accumulate, and changes should be more closely monitored, he wrote.
Murthy said the new strain doesn't change the public health advice to wear masks, wash hands and maintain social distance.

AP: No immediate ruling after hearing on fate of DACA program

HOUSTON (AP) — A federal judge did not immediately issue a ruling following a court hearing Tuesday on the fate of a U.S. program shielding immigrants brought to the country illegally as children.
During a nearly 3 1/2 hour hearing, Texas and eight other states asked U.S. District Judge Andrew Hanen to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, which provides limited protections to about 650,000 people. The program was enacted by former President Barack Obama in 2012.
The states, represented by the Texas Attorney General's Office, argued DACA violates the Constitution by circumventing Congress' authority on immigration laws. The states also argued that DACA illegally awards benefits such as work authorization to recipients and has increased states' costs, including $250 million a year for social services to DACA recipients in Texas.
"President Obama overstepped his authority when his administration issued the DACA memorandum in 2012," Todd Disher, a lawyer with the Texas Attorney General's Office, told Hanen.
A group of DACA recipients represented by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, or MALDEF, and the New Jersey Attorney General's Office asked Hanen to dismiss the lawsuit. They argued Obama had the authority to institute DACA.
Nina Perales, a lawyer for MALDEF, told Hanen that the states lack standing to sue because they weren't harmed by DACA, as benefits such as work authorization for recipients were not given by DACA but authorized under other programs and regulations that had previously been created.
The states' case "is like a doughnut. The center is empty," said Perales.
Hanen is expected to rule at a later date.
The U.S. Supreme Court previously ruled President Donald Trump's attempt to end DACA in 2017 was unlawful. A New York judge in December ordered the Trump administration to restore the program.
But the Houston case directly targets the original terms under which DACA was created.
Suing alongside Texas are Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, South Carolina, and West Virginia — states that all have Republican governors or state attorneys general.
President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to protect DACA, but a ruling against the program could limit his

ability to keep the program or something similar in place.
“DACA has to be replaced by a legislative approach,” said MALDEF's president, Thomas Saenz.
But Congress has not taken any action related to DACA in recent years.
While DACA is often described as a program for young immigrants, many recipients have lived in the U.S. for a decade or longer after being brought without permission or overstaying visas. The liberal Center for American Progress says roughly 254,000 children have at least one parent relying on DACA. Some recipients are grandparents.
Hanen rejected Texas’ request in 2018 to stop the program through a preliminary injunction, but he has said he believes DACA as enacted by Obama is unconstitutional. In 2015, Hanen ruled Obama could not expand DACA protections or institute a program shielding their parents.
Hanen said Tuesday’s hearing was not about discussing border security or whether DACA is good or bad policy, but “whether DACA was legally created.”

Ryan Kopsa
Digital Communications Manager

Office of Governor Pete Ricketts
OFFICE 402-471-1974
CELL 402-890-2467
ryan.kopsa@nebraska.gov
governor.nebraska.gov | **Facebook** | **Twitter**