From:	Gage, Taylor
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Friday, April 17, 2020

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KTIV: Gov. Ricketts refutes allegations made by Omaha Tribe of Nebraska
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KETV: 'We want to be part of the solution' Omaha restaurant sells high demand pantry items
NET: UNMC Model Projects Fewer Nebraska Deaths From COVID-19
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LJS: CHI Health moving patients, ventilators to help Grand Island area
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OWH: Ricketts tells Nebraskans not to get their hopes up about relaxation of social distancing rules

LINCOLN — Nebraskans hoping to see social distancing rules disappear after May 1 got a dose of caution from Gov. Pete Ricketts on Thursday.
Don't count on it, the governor said.
"I don't want to raise anyone's expectations," he said. "We are not going to lift all of these social distancing guidelines all at once.
"In fact, we will probably be doing some social distancing for the foreseeable future, until we have a vaccine."
The state's plan, he said, appears to be working to "flatten" and slow the spread of the coronavirus so the state's health care systems are not overwhelmed to the point that patients can't get an intensive care bed or a ventilator and health care workers don't have proper protective gear.
The governor spoke just before joining a conference call with President Donald Trump and other state governors on Thursday afternoon.

Ricketts emphasized that Nebraska would not alter its plan to continue its "protective health measures" until the end of April, regardless of what the president announces.
But, toward the end of the month, the governor said he would use a combination of federal and local guidance, as well as data on use of the state's health care resources, to decide what guidelines might be lifted on a "step by step" basis.
Earlier this month, Ricketts mentioned the possibility that the rule against social gatherings of more than 10 people could be amended to 25 people or more.
At his daily press briefing, the governor again defended his approach to the COVID-19 outbreak, which has been criticized by some for avoiding the "shelter-in-place" orders issued in more hard-hit states.
Ricketts pointed to voluntary polls taken by users of Google in Nebraska indicating that people are spending 29% less time at work and 11% more time at home.
"We're going to continue to stick to the plan we have now, because that plan is working," he said.
The guidelines Trump released Thursday call for places with declining infections and strong testing to begin a three-phased gradual reopening of businesses and schools, with each phase lasting at least 14 days, meant to ensure that the virus outbreak doesn't accelerate again.
"I appreciate President Trump's guidelines for reopening pieces of the economy that have been closed temporarily," Ricketts said in a statement Friday afternoon. "It is critical that we get people back to work safely and continue to slow the spread of the virus as the country opens up."
Trump also announced on Thursday a bipartisan task force to work on reviving the economy called the Opening Up America Again Congressional Group. Nebraska Sens. Deb Fischer and Ben Sasse are on the panel, as are Iowa Sens. Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst.
"I know he wants to open up the country. Everybody does," Ricketts said. But, he added, it must be done in a way that doesn't allow the virus to return.
Thursday marked the end of the first week of the governor's call for Nebraskans to stay home for 21 days in hopes of curbing the state's coronavirus outbreak.
In other coronavirus news:

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

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

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

He suggested postponing commencement until midsummer, after the virus peak has been reached in the state.
He said that Red Cloud was able to hold a commencement for its nine graduates, with attendees sitting in vehicles but that not all school districts in the state will be able to do that.

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

A representative of the Omaha Tribe maintained that the state had "withdrawn" its offer of financial

aid. The governor said that was a misunderstanding.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: 14 senators ask Ricketts to broaden definition of essential workers

Fourteen Nebraska state senators are calling on Gov. Pete Ricketts to shore up protections for state employees and other front-line workers.
In a letter sent Thursday, the senators said they have heard concerns from constituents working on the front lines of the COVID-19 response about their own health, safety, and stability.
They urged Ricketts to include grocery store, pharmacy and food production workers in the definition of front-line emergency service providers. Those emergency workers could then qualify under the coronavirus relief bill and any future federal acts for certain economic assistance and benefits, such as access to emergency child care, said Lincoln Sen. Kate Bolz.
The letter also asked the governor to:
* Allow every state employee possible to work from home. Currently about 30% are working remotely.
* Allow services provided to the public, such as Department of Motor Vehicles, Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Labor services to be provided over the phone or delayed until the crisis passes, and closing offices to face-to-face interaction wherever possible to protect state employees.
* Issue a proclamation or guidance to businesses to promote proper social distancing, work-from-home policies, adopt additional health and screening practices, expand personnel and leave provisions that encourage self-quarantine to contain spread.
Ricketts spoke to the letter in his daily briefing, saying he hasn't made a formal distinction in his recommendations of which essential workers have to go to work versus everybody else.
Emergency workers can be designated for priority in virus testing and lodging programs, he said, but programs may be extended to others down the road.
"I think we prioritized appropriately," he said.
The 14 senators are Sens. Dan Quick, Sue Crawford, Adam Morfeld, Rick Kolowski, Kate Bolz, Anna Wishart, Carol Blood, Robert Hilkemann, Machaela Cavanaugh, Wendy DeBoer, Megan Hunt, Sara Howard, John McCollister and Matt Hansen.
By JoAnne Young

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

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

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

personnel and leave practices that encourage self-quarantine to contain spread.

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

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

LINCOLN — A state senator from Omaha on Thursday predicted a spike in coronavirus cases unless Gov. Pete Ricketts takes action to block the Nebraska Crossing shopping mall from reopening.
"I think we've seen what happens when we are not staying put," State Sen. Steve Lathrop said. "You're seeing hot spots in Grand Island and Sioux Falls."
"If people start going back to retail like pre-virus days, we're going to have more people get sick, more people spreading things, more people in the hospital and more people subject to this life-threatening condition," he said.
The governor, during his daily coronavirus briefing, rejected Lathrop's call for a stay-at-home order to block the reopening of the outlet mall, which has planned a "soft" opening in a week and a grand opening in two weeks.
"We haven't asked anyone to close," Ricketts said. "We are asking Nebraskans to exercise their personal responsibility, their civic duty, to do the right thing."
That, he said, includes following the "six rules" he unveiled last week to keep Nebraskans safe. One of the rules is to avoid unnecessary shopping trips and, if you must shop, to leave family and friends at home and go alone. Ricketts unveiled the rules as he urged Nebraskans to redouble their social distancing efforts through the final weeks of April.
"We've got to continue to stay focused on this, but we don't need to say that person or this person needs to close their business," the governor said.
Nebraska Crossing has said that it would be the first shopping mall in North America to reopen and that it could serve as a "case study" and help establish best practices for reopening stores. But the head of the Nebraska Hospital Association has condemned the reopening as an "irresponsible" move that would nullify the progress the state has made in slowing the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.
Lathrop, in a letter to the governor on Wednesday, said the outlet mall has "nonessential businesses" that shouldn't be allowed to reopen until effective treatments for the virus are found and more progress is made toward developing a vaccine.
"Social distancing is not a cure," the senator said. He fears that if restrictions on public gatherings are relaxed, cases of coronavirus will begin spiking because the vast majority of Nebraskans have not been exposed to it.
By Paul Hammel

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

Gov. Pete Ricketts said Thursday all signs suggest that his plan to control the spread of the coronavirus in the state is working and that he has not asked Nebraska Crossing Outlets to delay its scheduled reopening at a time when presence of the virus in the state is expected to peak.
Rod Yates, owner of the shopping mall along Interstate 80 between Omaha and Lincoln, said he is planning to reopen some outlets next week.

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

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

"Nebraskans do the right thing," Ricketts said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lincoln Children's Zoo President and CEO John Chapo joined the briefing to announce that the zoo

will offer virtual, interactive tours of the zoo for elementary school children during this time when schools are closed.
"Teachers can bring up to 100 children to interact with the zookeepers," he said. The zoo plans to provide tours at least 12 to 15 times a week.
State Education Commissioner Matthew Blomstedt suggested that schools could consider waiting to honor this year's senior class graduates with ceremonies in July if the coronavirus threat has been tamed by then.
By Don Walton

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

The posted speed limit on Interstate 80 near the exit to the Nebraska Crossing mall in Sarpy County is 75 mph.
Drivers, for their sakes and the common good, are supposed to go no faster than that and no slower than 40.
Those speed limits are as clear as the black numbers on the white roadside sign, as clear as the digital message flashing “Nebraska Strong” in the mostly empty parking lot of a massive Gretna shopping mall on this sunny still-pandemic April day.
The lot is empty now because of Gov. Pete Ricketts’ stay-at-home-through-April request. But by next week, expect to see more cars outside Nebraska Crossing. The mall’s owner, Rod Yates, has decided to speed past the state’s voluntary policy, and Ricketts won’t stop him.
Some critics see Yates as a lead-footed driver and contend that the governor is too willing to yield. Others support Yates’ goal of making Nebraska Crossing the first mall in North America to reopen. A day after the news drew national attention, neither Yates nor Ricketts appeared to change lanes.
Yates might appear to be flooring it. (After all, Nebraska schools are looking at potential fall-at-home contingencies). But he said he’s still driving safely. Some of the global brands that fill the 80-plus shopping bays at Nebraska Crossing had noted Nebraska’s relatively lower coronavirus curve and asked him to be the test case for reopening retail.
Yates, who lives in Omaha, was happy to “do my part as a landlord to help a trillion-dollar industry get back on its feet.”
The governor said Wednesday that it was Nebraskans’ civic duty to voluntarily comply with his health directives versus “the heavy hand of government coming down on you.”
A formal stay-at-home order has been something Ricketts has avoided like — how to put it? — the plague.
Instead, Ricketts has relied on an appeal to common sense and Nebraska Nice in offering a softer — and not ineffective — approach. A World-Herald analysis found the state ranks low in both known coronavirus cases and deaths, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the immunologist on the national stage, said the state is doing a good job.
Ricketts has issued directives summed up by a catchphrase: stay home, stay healthy, stay connected. He has warned that April would be bad. He has said to hunker down. He has told Nebraskans to shop just once a week, alone, and only for essential services.
But when Yates, the mall owner, blew past him in the left lane on Tuesday, the governor let him go rather than pulling him over for speeding. Ricketts wouldn’t even address whether the mall qualified as an essential service.

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

Who wants to be stranded on that shoulder?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If you don't like it being open," she said of Nebraska Crossing, "then don't come."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The coronavirus is vexingly invisible, which makes the need for clarity in the response even greater. How will Yates keep crowds thin enough? How can he make the test case a success story and not put the state on the map for being, as Nebraska State Sen. Adam Morfeld dubbed it, "Covid Crossing"?

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

Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert has shown what clear rules look like. Like Ricketts, Stothert first relied on good will when she asked Omahans to quit going to city parks in groups. But picnickers, soccer teams and others ignored the "directive," so Stothert closed the parks, except for those passing through, including golfers.
We all yearn to get the family roadster back on the open highway.
But right now, the time calls for taking it slow — and that requires unambiguous traffic signs.
Here's one I saw on I-80, heading back home after my trip to Nebraska Crossing. The overhead sign pointed drivers to a state website on quarantine directives.
Wouldn't it have been clearer to just flash two words? Stay home.
By Erin Grace

WJAG: Nebraska Department of Education formulating various plans for schools

LINCOLN - When the coronavirus will dissipate and when a vaccine will be developed is still up in the air.
With that being said, Nebraska Department of Education Commissioner Mathew Blomstedt is discussing how to do wellness checks with families, how graduation will work, and what to do for summer school.
During the daily coronavirus press conference at the Capitol Thursday Blomstedt said he's working closely with schools, various superintendents, and Governor Pete Ricketts on how and when they will know what the data looks like so they can start to begin planning for opening schools this coming fall.
"We have to be prepared there might be needs for contingency plans, but this group of superintendents have been very committed to working with me and working with partners that we might bring together. I've had conversations with post-secondary education partners as well to look at the data. By the middle of the summer, perhaps by July, we'll have a conversation with data elements that we know and understand, and we can provide some of that planning."
Blomstedt said he's in the process of coming up with a scalable summer school program that involves digital materials.
By Cody Ronnfeldt

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

LINCOLN, Neb. — A federal appeals court panel ruled that medication abortions, in which women take pills to terminate a pregnancy, can be provided in Texas during the coronavirus pandemic.
The ruling Monday from a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals was among several developments in Republican-led states where governors have sought to prohibit almost all abortions by classifying them as elective procedures that should be put off during the virus outbreak.
Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued an executive order last month that bars non-essential medical procedures so that health resources can go to treating coronavirus patients. Texas' Republican attorney general has said that providing abortions other than for an immediate medical emergency would violate the order.
But a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said that medication abortions can go forward. In a concurrence, Judge James L. Dennis wrote that Texas' move to ban medication abortions "is a strong indication that the enforcement is pretextual and does not bear a 'real or

substantial relation’ to the public health crisis we are experiencing.”
Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts said Tuesday that he didn't think federal rulings would have an impact on Nebraska's Directed Health Measures.
"Our DHM, again, was applied in a uniform way to people with regard to all those elective surgeries regardless of what you're doing. If you're doing an elective surgery for replacing a knew versus doing an abortion," said Ricketts.
The governor said those surgeries can only be done in critical situations.
Arkansas Attorney General Leslie Rutledge on Wednesday asked the appeals court to lift a federal judge's order that allowed the state's only surgical abortion clinic to continue performing the procedure.
The state last week ordered Little Rock Family Planning Services to not perform surgical abortions unless they were needed to protect the life and health of the mother.
The state argued that the clinic violated a ban on elective surgeries during the coronavirus pandemic. Other states have used similar orders to restrict abortions.
Monday, a 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals panel upheld a lower-court order that overturned an Oklahoma ban.
The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals also declined to hear an appeal by Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost seeking to reverse a judge’s temporary restraining order allowing abortion facilities in the state to continue performing surgical abortions.
In Louisiana, an abortion provider in Shreveport filed a federal lawsuit to block any state attempts to ban abortions during the pandemic. June Medical Group, which operates the Hope clinic, said abortions are still currently being done
The Shreveport clinic is at the center of a separate case currently at the Supreme Court over whether doctors who perform abortions must have admitting privileges at a nearby hospital.
And in Tennessee, abortion providers filed an emergency motion in federal court seeking an order that would allow them to continue providing surgical abortions.
Over the weekend, Texas abortion clinics asked the Supreme Court to step in to allow medication abortions.
Such an abortion involves taking one pill at a clinic, then taking a second pill 24 to 48 hours later, typically at home. Clinics have argued that medication abortions do not require personal protective equipment like masks, gloves and gowns that might be needed for coronavirus patients.
Texas permits medication abortions during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy.
“Now it’s time for Gov. Abbott to end his exploitation of this pandemic to ban all abortion access,” said Nancy Northup, president and CEO of the Center for Reproductive Rights. "None of it is medically justified, all of it is unconstitutional, and women are being thrown into a state of fear and uncertainty.”
Attorney General Ken Paxton's office didn't immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday on the court's ruling.
Texas Alliance for Life issued a written statement calling on abortion providers to follow the original order to free up doctors and supplies.
“The most recent order fails to recognize the danger abortion providers pose to the public by refusing to comply with Governor Abbott’s executive order in the same way other providers of non-immediately medically necessary surgeries and procedures have done,” said Texas Alliance for Life Executive Director Joe Pojman.

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

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

Central Health District Director Teresa Anderson says Hall, Merrick and Hamilton counties now share over 300 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with most cases in Grand Island.
Officials expect that number to peak in just a week and a half: the outbreak could ultimately overwhelm the area's healthcare system, which Anderson said is already stressed.
"If we take our lessons from what's been happening in other parts of the country, I'm going to say the writing is on the wall," she warned.

But providers have avoided hitting capacity so far. Ed Hannon, president of St. Francis Hospital in Grand Island, says patient volume has been steady, but not unmanageable. The hospital is currently about 50 percent full.
"About 65 patients a day are coming into the ER. Of that, maybe half have respiratory type symptoms," he said on a press call Thursday.
Those respiratory cases are often sent to a recently opened fast track area, where doctors can triage them for hospitalization.
ICU beds have been harder to come by, with fewer than five available Thursday afternoon. But only a handful of patients are being admitted each day, as the vast majority can manage their symptoms at home.
Mary Lanning Hospital, which is just south of St. Francis in Hastings, has not activated its surge plan to cope with an influx of coronavirus patients. Mary Lanning continues to have capacity and can take more patients: as of Thursday, eight people were being treated for COVID-19. Four remain on ventilators in the intensive care unit.
Similar to St. Francis Hospital, Mary Lanning is not struggling with a shortage of equipment or bed capacity. Director of Nursing Ronda Ehly said keeping ICU beds properly staffed is the bigger issue.
"Not every nurse in my hospital can take care of an ICU patient on a ventilator," she said.
"So I have to make sure that not only are our patients safely taken care of with a nurse with the right skill set, but also, those nurses that are stretching beyond their skill set feel comfortable and supported in what they're doing."
Workers across all essential fields are finding their boundaries stretched as they keep the state functioning. And in some cases, employees feel the state has been too unwilling to regulate employers' pandemic policies.
After hearing from workers who must deal with the public, ten Nebraska state senators asked Governor Ricketts to take more action to protect them from the virus.
In a letter, the lawmayers asked Ricketts to formally consider people working in food production, grocery stores, and pharmacies "front line emergency service providers". They also requested private businesses get additional guidance on best ways to keep their employees safe.
Senator Kate Bolz of Lincoln was among those making the request.
"We've heard from several workers who are concerned about the things that they're being asked to do on the job," she said.
"And we think that gubernatorial guidance to private employers could help give those employees the

foundation that they need to advocate to their employers about things like access to cleaning products, safe social distancing, and remote work whenever possible."
Bolz and the other nine senators said they also continue to hear from state employees concerned about government departments keeping office hours. The letter requests Ricketts allow every state employee to work from home if possible, and temporarily close offices to the public.
By Christina Stella and Bill Kelly

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

Teresa Anderson of the Central District Health Department says the number of COVID-19 cases in the three-county area probably won't peak for another week and a half.
"Our expectation is that every day we will see a large number of new cases and every day we will see a number of deaths," Anderson said at Thursday's COVID-19 community update from City Hall.
"We believe that we haven't peaked yet, that we have maybe a week and a half before we'll actually peak," she said. "I would desperately love to be wrong about all of this. But if we take our lessons from what's been happening in other parts of the country, I'm going to say the writing is on the wall."
The Central District has a chance to reduce the number of cases by practicing social distancing, hand washing, staying home when you're sick and wearing a mask.
"So let's see if we can't prove me wrong, and I will be happy," Anderson said.
During the update, Anderson answered two questions that had been submitted by the public. Noting that hospitals seem to be keeping up with COVID-19, the questioner asked if there is a number that would overwhelm Grand Island's health care system.
"What we know is that our health care system currently is being taxed, or stressed. CHI St. Francis is doing a fantastic job of keeping up, with 17 ventilators. But because we keep getting very ill people admitted to the hospital, they're needing to transfer out people on ventilators," Anderson said.
At a press briefing Wednesday, Gov. Pete Ricketts said 17 people are on ventilators at CHI Health St. Francis. At least seven COVID-19 patients this week have been transferred to other hospitals, including ones in Omaha, the Omaha World-Herald reported. But CHI St. Francis is not at capacity and staff members are staying calm and collected, said Ricketts and Dr. Gary Anthone, Nebraska's chief medical officer.
Anderson said Thursday that "one of the problems is having enough equipment at the hospital for this surge in cases. Another key problem is that ventilators require special attention by specialized nurses, and there aren't enough.
"Again, CHI is doing a fantastic job of recruiting other CHI ventilator-trained nurses to come and provide assistance here," Anderson said. But people in this area need to stop the spread today "or we will be very quickly overwhelmed."
At the beginning of her talk, Anderson said her "smile today is a little bit strained, because we have increasingly
bad news."
The district now has more than 300 documented lab-tested COVID-19 cases.
The state Department of Health and Human Services reported that Howard County has its first confirmed COVID-19 case. The Howard County resident is a man in his 60s with underlying health conditions who was known to be in direct contact with another person who was later identified to have COVID-19.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

People should wear a mask when they go out in public and make sure it's well-fitted, she said.

Except for the people living in our homes, we should all stay six feet apart, she said.

“The minute you start feeling symptoms of any kind, and there are a huge variety of symptoms associated with this virus, you need to remove yourself from any other individuals and isolate,” she said. “We have no room for error. Everyone must do their part.”
Anderson said “this is not a time to try to place blame or to find out who started this problem. We knew that we had the possibility of having a severe case of COVID-19. Every community knew that.”
For whatever reason, she said, Grand Island and Hall County have become the leading area of the state “for infection and spread. So we’re going to continue the things we have been doing and we want you to continue as well.”
By Jeff Bahr

AP: Grand Island area now has most coronavirus cases in Nebraska

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A central Nebraska county with a major meatpacking plant and a lot of nursing homes and manufacturing facilities now has more coronavirus cases than any other county in the state, according to new public health data.
Hall County confirmed 278 cases on Wednesday, surpassing the 263 known cases in Omaha’s Douglas County, even though Douglas County has nearly nine times as many residents.
Hall County, which includes Grand Island, has seen a spike in cases at the JBS USA meatpacking plant, the McCain Foods frozen appetizer factory, nursing homes and a health clinic. Last week, the farm equipment manufacturer Case New Holland temporarily halted production to protect line workers who work in close proximity.
The actual number of Hall County cases is likely much higher than what’s reported because the county has a “very limited” number of tests available, said Central District Health Department Director Teresa Anderson. The Nebraska National Guard helped test people last week, and Gov. Pete Ricketts said members will continue that work this weekend.

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

The Grand Island area — by far Nebraska’s biggest coronavirus hot spot — now has rates of illness comparable to some of the hardest-hit states in the country.
Not only does surrounding Hall County now have more cases than any county in Nebraska, its per capita case rate is almost 12 times that of Douglas County and more than 25 times that of Lancaster County, a World-Herald analysis found.
The Hall County rate is also now about equal to that of Louisiana, which ranks among the top states nationally in both cases and deaths. It’s also higher than the per capita rate in Michigan, a state that has been in such a significant state-ordered lockdown because of the virus that it’s spawned public protests.
And as eye-popping as such numbers are, Grand Island, Nebraska’s third-largest metro area, is still likely weeks away from its peak of cases and deaths. The sixth death in the local three-county health district was reported Thursday.
“Our expectation is that every day we will see large numbers of new cases and every day we will see a number of deaths,” Central District Health Department Director Teresa Anderson said Thursday. “If we take our lessons from what’s been happening in other parts of the country, I’m going to say the writing is on the wall.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She said the county is getting much-needed additional testing and will continue to advise residents to follow social distancing guidelines.
There have been a number of cases in Grand Island centered on large employers, including a meatpacking plant. And there are also a large number tied to nursing homes and long-term-care facilities, with 40 workers and residents at nine facilities having already tested positive.
But in the end, Anderson said, the disease has now spread so much that it can't really be linked to any one employer, facility, family or part of town.
"What do (cases) have in common?" she said. "At this time, we can tell you they really have nothing in common. That leads us to believe the virus is truly everywhere."
By Henry J. Cordes and Erin Duffy

OWH: New UNMC modeling predicts 50 to 180 coronavirus deaths in Nebraska

New modeling by the University of Nebraska Medical Center indicates that social distancing is making a difference with COVID-19 but that Nebraska can still expect between 50 and 180 deaths.
Dr. Ali Khan, dean of the UNMC College of Public Health, discussed the results during Thursday's NET News town hall with Gov. Pete Ricketts.
Deaths in Nebraska stood at 25 on Thursday, based on state and local numbers. Nebraska hasn't peaked yet, Khan said, but "what we are doing is making a difference."
Khan and Ricketts dismissed the allure of seeking "herd immunity" by abandoning restrictions.
"Herd immunity means 60 to 80% of people get infected," Khan said. "Herd immunity would have been devastation in terms of … cases and deaths."
By Nancy Gaarder

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

As cases in some area of the state have had a large growth in cases of the coronavirus case, the Panhandle has not, to date.
On Thursday, Scotts Bluff County officials updated that 33 positive cases have been confirmed in the Panhandle, with one more case from Scotts Bluff County reported. That person, a man in his 40s, who Scotts Bluff County Health Director Paulette Schnell reported did have connections to previously reported Scotts Bluff County cases. PPHD said all close contacts of the man had been contacted and were self-quarantining.
To date, Panhandle health officials have tested 725 people since March 2. Fourteen people have recovered, with persons in Box Butte County, Cheyenne County, Morrill County and Scotts Bluff County among those persons who have recovered. Officials did not provide any updates on persons who were hospitalized and had tested positive for the coronavirus. Last week, three people from the Panhandle were reported to have been hospitalized. One of those individuals, a Kimball man who had been hospitalized for about two weeks, has been released. The status of the two other individuals was not known.
In other areas of the state, the COVID-19 case is much more serious.
On Wednesday, Hall County, where Grand Island is located, reported 278 cases, exceeding cases reported in other areas of the state, including Douglas County. On that same day, Douglas County reported 263 cases. Douglas County reported its first case on March 6 and Hall County didn't report

its first case until nearly three weeks later, on March 26.
Media in Hall County were reporting an additional 71 cases had been reported Thursday, but state numbers did not yet reflect those cases as of press time. In Thursday evening's update, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services had reported that the state had exceeded 1,000 cases, reporting 1,066 cases as of press time.
Those numbers, however, don't include the latest surge in cases in Hall County, with the local health department reporting 339 cases in its Thursday update. State totals still reflect Hall County at 268 cases. Twenty-four deaths have been associated with the coronavirus, according to the Nebraska DHHS.
At least two cases in the Panhandle have involved nursing homes. West Nebraska Veterans Home and the Sidney Health Care Center both released information regarding protocols at those facilities and Schnell said that officials are continuing with investigations at those facilities.
"We're doing very aggressive testing with them and they're being very cooperative."
In Thursday's briefing, people were also reminded about Gov. Pete Ricketts' "Stay Home. Stay Healthy. Stay Connected." initiative, which is underway until the end of the month. The governor has encouraged people to stay at home. Other health measures, such as wearing a mask when in public, have also been recommended.
Engel said that officials continue to recommend that persons experiencing symptoms or possibly exposed to coronavirus self-quarantine. She noted that some of the recent cases have not involved a lot of reports about possible exposures because people are identified as close contacts and have been self-quarantining during the time that they are believed to be contagious, which is a two to 14-day window.
In other news, the Panhandle Health District officials noted that they had been interviewed by Time Magazine on the approach taken by the rural health district.
"It was a really great opportunity to really talk about where we've come and what we'd done over the last couple of months," Director Kim Engel said, sayign it was heartwarming to talk about partners and the proactive approach taken in the Panhandle. The district also talked about the challenges and different perspectives, she said.
Businesses continue to be connected with resources through PPHD, which hosts a business call regularly on Thursdays. Questions during Thursday's call involved hiring of new employees - who are recommended to quarantine if they have traveled from out of state - and other topics. Directed health measures remain in place that have changed restaurant and bar operations and also closed some businesses, such as salons and tattoo parlors.
For information on COVID-19 and resources, visit pphd.org.
By Maunette Loeks

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

Nebraska recorded two more deaths from the novel coronavirus on Thursday as the total number of cases surpassed the 1,000 mark.
The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported Thursday evening that 1,066 cases have been confirmed in the state.
The two deaths reported Thursday occurred in Douglas and Hamilton Counties. According to state and local figures, that brings Nebraska to 25 deaths.
The latest death in the Omaha metro area involved a man in his 70s who was suffering from multiple

underlying conditions, according to the Douglas County Health Department.
In Hamilton County, a man in his 60s who lived in a long-term-care facility in Aurora died, according to the Central District Health Department. This brought the district, which is anchored by Grand Island, to its sixth death.
The Central District leads the state in coronavirus cases, exceeding Douglas County, which is far more populous. The district has recorded 360 cases, of which 339 are in Hall County, where Grand Island is; 15 are in Hamilton County; and six are in Merrick County.
Douglas County now has a total of 266 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and eight deaths resulting from it.
Douglas County recorded three new cases Thursday, said Health Department spokesman Phil Rooney.
They involve people who range in age from less than a year old to someone in their 50s, he said. One of the people has been hospitalized. One of them had contact with someone known to be infected, and the two other cases remain under investigation.
This was the second infant in as many days to test positive in the county. Rooney said he couldn't provide additional information on the two babies, including where they might have contracted the virus and whether they are seriously ill, because of federal privacy laws.
The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported three new cases Thursday, bringing the total there to 62.
Two of Thursday's cases involve women in their 30s and 50s and were acquired in the community. At least 43 of the county's cases were acquired by moving about the community, the Health Department says.
The third case from Thursday is still under investigation and involves a person in their 30s.
Lancaster County has recorded one death.
By Nancy Gaarder

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

A senior living facility in Blair that has seen at least 19 coronavirus cases and one death last week reopened Wednesday.
Carter Place Senior Living temporarily closed in late March, and residents moved to neighboring health care facilities and hospitals after both residents and staff tested positive for COVID-19.
The facility brought back seven residents Wednesday, and an Enlivant spokesperson said it planned to bring back others Thursday.
"Beyond April 16th, we plan to welcome remaining residents back as they are deemed appropriate to return by the hospital, which is responsible for determining the schedule of our residents' return, based on their symptoms and testing protocols," the spokesperson said in an email sent by owner Enlivant's public relations firm.
Enlivant said that, prior to reopening, it did a full cleaning and remediation of Carter Place, continued staff training on COVID-19 best practices and procedures and conducted a voluntary Nebraska Medicine Infection Control Assessment and Promotion program review and walk through of Carter Place.
The infection control program and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services have cleared Carter Place to bring residents back, the Enlivant spokesperson said.
The facility will maintain ongoing COVID-19 precautions based on evolving guidance from the federal

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, prohibit all nonessential visitors, screen all employees and essential visiting medical personnel, Enlivant said.
There will be no group activities, and all dining will occur in each resident's room.
"Our top priority remains the safety and health of our residents and employees," the spokesperson said. "We will continue to adjust our protocols based on evolving guidance from the CDC and in coordination with local & state health departments.
The Carter Place resident who died Sunday was former Dana College professor Darrell Dibben.
Carter Place is one of 230 Enlivant senior living communities across 26 states. Other locations in Nebraska include those in Seward, Nebraska City, Fremont and Columbus.
By JoAnne Young

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

HASTINGS, Neb. (KSNB) - Good Samaritan Society – Hastings Village in Hastings, Nebraska, has confirmed that one resident and three employees in Perkins Pavilion skilled nursing facility, and one resident in the Goldbeck Towers apartment have tested positive for COVID-19.
We are frequently communicating with all residents, staff and families. We are working closely with state and local health officials to ensure our response plan meets the needs of this rapidly changing situation, and are following their guidance on testing employees who may have been exposed.
Our team is taking extra precautions to monitor the health of staff and residents. The health and safety of our residents, employees and the community we serve during this unprecedented pandemic remains our highest priority.

LJS: CHI Health moving patients, ventilators to help Grand Island area

CHI Health said Thursday that it has transferred patients out of Grand Island and also moved ventilators there from other hospitals to deal with the outbreak of COVID-19 in Hall County.
Cliff Robertson, CEO of the health system, said five patients had been transferred from CHI St. Francis in Grand Island to Omaha-area hospitals within the past 36 hours. He also said ventilators were sent to the hospital from CHI St. Elizabeth in Lincoln.
Robertson said the patients transferred were stable and they were moved to free up space in the intensive care unit, not because the Grand Island hospital couldn't handle their treatment.
In fact, he said both CHI St. Francis and CHI Good Samaritan in Kearney are similar in size to St. Elizabeth and all CHI Health employees get the same training whether they are in Omaha or a smaller community.
As of Thursday evening, Hall County had 339 confirmed cases of COVID-19, well more than Douglas County, which has about nine times the population.
Even with the transfers, as of Thursday morning, the Grand Island hospital still had 18 patients with positive COVID-19 diagnoses, 13 of those in its ICU, 11 of whom were on ventilators.
By contrast, St. Elizabeth in Lincoln had 15 COVID-19 patients in the hospital Thursday, none of whom were on ventilators. None of those patients were from Lincoln, however. There are 24 COVID-19 patients on ventilators at CHI Health hospitals in the metro Omaha area.
Overall, Robertson said there is plenty of capacity in the CHI Health system, with 350 beds available as of Thursday. That includes Grand Island.

No one in Hall County should "be afraid that the hospital is full," he said. "It is not."
The Grand Island hospital and all other CHI Health hospitals have adequate personal protective equipment and the hospital system has experienced no shortages, Robertson said.
When asked whether any staff in Grand Island had tested positive for COVID-19, he said CHI Health does not disclose that information, but he did say that there have been "an incredibly small number of exposures (among staff) and an incredibly small number of folks who have tested positive for the disease."
"So far we've been blessed," Robertson said.
That blessing has not extended to the company's financial situation, though, as he said CHI Health's revenues are down 30% since the pandemic started.
Despite that, he said the health system has not furloughed any staff who work in patient areas, including nonmedical workers, such as food and cleaning staff. Those workers are guaranteed pay as long as they agree to be redeployed where necessary. Those who don't agree to that stipulation can take paid time off, he said.
By Matt Olberding

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

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

Mike Tobias, NET News: First, give us a sense of what's it like right now for Grand Island's health care providers, clinics and hospitals?
Teresa Anderson, Central District Health Department Health Director: I think it's rather stressful, and hectic and challenging.
Tobias: Is the number of reported cases an accurate representation of the scope of COVID-19 in Grand Island?
Anderson: What I can tell you is, and these are last week's numbers that I'm going to talk about, so at the time that we had a thousand tests done, that was maybe the middle of last week, we have 78,000 people that we serve. So a thousand tests seems like a small number for that large population. With that small number of tests we were seeing a pretty high rate of positives as compared to our peers across the state.
Tobias: You've said you're hoping that "the number of much needed COVID-19 tests will increase."
Anderson: First I'll tell you where we are right now, because we have very limited testing. The hospital, of course, has testing available. Our major clinics, our larger clinics have limited to no tests available. So if we can't test to see where it is, and can't test to identify folks who are contagious, regardless of whether they have symptoms or not, there's not much we can do to have them quarantined. If you have a test that says "I'm positive," then you're more likely to say "I will stay home." But if you have a few sniffles, or a little bit of a cough, you're more likely to just keep going because that's our nature, at least in Nebraska. If we have more tests we can better identify the depth of the problem. This week we have the National Guard here again, thanks to the DHHS and the governor, so we're able to continue to test today, tomorrow and Saturday here in Grand Island. But we can't test just everybody because we only have 50 tests per day. So what we're hoping to do

with those tests is to prioritize individuals who have symptoms, or who have been with a close contact who is identified as a positive COVID person. So we're trying to catch people at whatever stage we can, and again with the whole goal, and this is kind of Public Health 101, is to identify people who are contagious and have them quarantine.
Tobias: Any indication you'll get more tests?
Anderson: There is some indication of that. Just yesterday we requisitioned a number of tests for our clinics, so that the tests would come here and we will be able to redistribute them to the clinic based on need. Through the Governor's Office and through DHHS at the state level, they're able to procure some of those tests for us. Otherwise we would be without much of any tests.
Tobias: Why are you seeing so many cases in Hall County?
Anderson: When we started down this path and knew that the pandemic was coming, we were looking at how vulnerable we were in this three county area, but specifically in Hall County. We know that, when we're looking at the county road map rankings that tell us how healthy we are here, that we have some issues. We know that we have a lower median household income than the rest of the state, in a large part, and we also know that, generally, vulnerable populations will include our elderly, and we have a number of elderly citizens in our area. Also, when you're a culturally diverse community like we are, that that's an increased risk for illness based on that alone.
Tobias: Has the Hispanic-Latino population been hit disproportionally hard?
Anderson: The hard thing about that is that we have not kept data on race or ethnicity. While we were preparing for this, we didn't prepare well for everything. So, at least, at the local level, and I'm not sure what data we're submitting at the state level, I don't think that we're monitoring ethnicity and race, but I'm not certain on that. I can tell you that we have a number of interpreters that we're using in our contacts, so we are aware that we have some English as second language folks here and we're working to connect with them. When we do that, it takes a little bit longer because we need to use an interpreter to get the message there, but so far we've been able to provide those interpreters in-house.
Tobias: What’s it going to take to slow your outbreak?
Anderson: So this is where we are right now. It feels like every day we have a lesser chance of controlling it. We've worked with our community and I've been really vocal about the need for every person to take this seriously. At this point, when we're getting 50 or 60 new cases every day, we're concerned that there may not be anything that we can do to slow the spread, if we cannot get the folks that live in this area to stay home and have social distancing and protect others and protect ourselves from catching the virus.
Tobias: Is a stay-at-home order needed?
Anderson: I don't know how much further that goes than what our current directed health measure is. But there has to be a way for us to get the message out. You have to stay home, and whether that's voluntarily or whether it's mandated at the state level, we need to get people to stay home
Tobias: Do you have all the resources and help you need?
Anderson: We have a lot of support. I will to tell you that, within our community itself, we have a really strong network of individuals, with the volunteers, the law enforcement, the first responders, excellent working relationships with our providers and with the hospital. What I will tell you too is, this is Public Health 101 as well, is that we say all public health is local. So we know that when we're hit with a disaster or a public health emergency that we have to take care of ourselves and that's what we've been doing. In addition to all of the folks within our community who reach out and support us, we have had some assistance through DHHS and also through the College of Public

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

OWH: Jobless numbers continue to climb in Nebraska; more than 16,000 file claims

LINCOLN — More than 16,000 additional Nebraska workers filed first-time jobless claims last week as the coronavirus pandemic continued to wreak economic havoc.
A report from the U.S. Department of Labor showed that 16,391 people filed for unemployment benefits in Nebraska for the week that ended Saturday.
The number of claims was fewer than the records set in each of the previous two weeks but still topped any weekly total prior to those two in Nebraska. It shows the continuing economic toll of measures aimed at reducing the spread of the virus.
Over the past month, 83,870 Nebraskans have filed for unemployment benefits. Those include people laid off from work as well as those on furlough. Federal legislation allowed self-employed people and “gig” workers, such as Uber drivers, to seek pandemic unemployment benefits. Typically, unemployment benefits are not available to those workers.
Retail trade accounted for the largest number of first-time claims by industry last week, while the bulk of claims in late March were from accommodations and food service workers.
Nebraska Labor Commissioner John Albin said the state has added many more people to process the unemployment claims. The state started with 32 claims adjusters. As of this week, there are about 200 people tackling the mountain of new filings. The goal is to get checks headed out to most people within 28 days of filing.
The State Labor Department announced Wednesday that it has started issuing the extra $600 weekly benefit payments available under the federal stimulus bill. The $600 payments are being made separately from regular state unemployment benefits, which are a maximum of $440 weekly.
Along with the additional payments, the federal legislation allowed workers to draw unemployment benefits for an additional 13 weeks beyond the usual 26-week limit.
Nebraska has waived some of its usual requirements as well. Workers do not have to take an unpaid week before benefits can begin, and they are not required to search for work. Employers are not being charged for benefits paid to their former employees if the layoff was because of the coronavirus.
Nationally, the number of first-time applicants for unemployment benefits fell last week but still came in at 5.25 million, capping four weeks of coronavirus-related shutdowns that erased more than 10 years of job creation. The initial jobless claims were at 6.62 million the prior week.
By Martha Stoddard

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By Paul Hammel

LJS: PPP money has run out, but approved borrowers will still get money

The Paycheck Protection Program has been extremely popular. In fact, it's been too popular.

In a joint statement released Thursday morning, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin and U.S. Small Business Administration Administrator Jovita Carranza said the program has processed more than 14 years' worth of loan volume in less than 14 days.

Because of that, the program meant to help small businesses keep people employed has run out of money. The $349 billion allocated to the loans, which are forgivable if businesses use them to keep workers on payroll or rehire laid-off workers, is already spoken for.

As of Monday, more than 18,500 Nebraska businesses had been approved for the loans, with the amount topping $2.7 billion. Overall, 1.7 million loans were approved nationwide. Rep. Jeff

Fortenberry said in a Tweet on Thursday that Nebraska had more applications approved per capita than any other state.
Many businesses have already gotten their money. Executive Travel owner Steve Glenn said Wednesday that his funds came through in a week, and he announced that he's brought his staff back to work.
Mike Murman, who owns Glacial Till Vineyard & Winery, said his loan was processed and money in his account in six days.
For those who haven't received money yet, the good news is that as long as the loan has been approved by the SBA, the funds will be coming.
"Borrowers who have received authorization from the SBA have funds already earmarked for them," said Betsy Perez, vice president of marketing at Union Bank & Trust. "They may still be in the loan closing process, but their loan should be funded as long as they provide all documentation and sign their closing documents within the timelines provided by their lender."
Those who haven't had their loan approved yet are out of luck for the time being, however.
"Borrowers whose applications are still in process that have not received SBA authorization must wait until further funds are released or find another option," Perez said.
President Donald Trump and several lawmakers are calling for a $250 billion bill to provide additional appropriations for the program.
"We need a standalone bill to replenish this fund so that American workers, families, and small businesses receive the needed relief to keep our economy strong and workers on payroll," Rep. Don Bacon said on his Facebook page. "Congress must act now and fast."
By Matt Olberding

AP: Kansas ranchers burn land despite plea from health officials

BELLE PLAINE, Kan. (AP) — Kansas ranchers eager to prepare their land for cattle grazing have mostly brushed off the plea from state health officials to voluntarily cut back this spring's prairie burning to reduce air pollution during the coronavirus pandemic.
With the potential of the pandemic overwhelming the state's medical facilities, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment on March 26 encouraged land owners and managers to reduce burned acres this spring in an effort to mitigate respiratory concerns connected to breathing the smoke.
Officials warned that individuals with respiratory issues, including COVID-19, as well as those with preexisting heart and lung diseases, children and elderly may experience worse symptoms due to the smoke from fires.
But air quality monitors this past week have picked up "significantly high readings" downwind from Kansas in the Lincoln and Omaha areas of Nebraska, with smoke from Kansas reaching as far north as South Dakota, said Rick Brunetti, director of the Bureau of Air at at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.
"We are seeing very little, if any, reduction in the amount of burning that is taking place in Kansas at the present time, Brunetti said.
The reasons vary, experts say. Some landowners may already have had contracts in place with the professionals hired to do the burning. Others have agreements in place to fatten cattle on those acres this summer. And still others do so because that is the way they have always done it and are more comfortable with burning in the spring.

“There is a whole infrastructure that is geared up to do this, so it doesn’t surprise me,” said Craig Volland, chairman of the air quality committee of the Kansas chapter of the Sierra Club.
Dr. Lee Norman, KDHE Secretary, said on Wednesday that he does not “have the inclination” to recommend now an outright ban on all rangeland burning because pollution levels aren’t consistently above the thresholds set by the federal government.
“I think that would be considered if we had continued high number of coronavirus cases and influx into hospitals and that kind of thing,” Norman said. “But we actually are not seeing an unusual amount of clinical activity now in those facilities.
Air quality standards were exceeded six times between April 3 and 9 in Kansas, according to the latest Flint Hills Prescribed Fire Update. Pollution levels were also exceeded Saturday in Lincoln, Nebraska, as the smoke from Kansas drifted across state lines.
A day earlier, the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department in Nebraska issued a health advisory to the general public saying smoke in the air was expected to reach levels that are unhealthy for everyone. They especially pose an elevated risk to children, older adults and those with asthma, lung disease, other respiratory conditions or heart disease.
About 2.6 million acres (1.1 million hectares) were burned in Kansas last year, compared to 1.5 million acres (about 607,000 hectares) in 2018 and 2.4 million acres (about 971,000 hectares) in 2017, according to satellite data by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
For decades, landowners have burned their fields each spring as a way to control invasive plant species and increase the lushness of pastures where they will graze beef cattle in the coming months.
That is especially the case in the Flint Hills, where the rock is so close to the surface and the terrain so hilly that tilling is impractical. Encompassing several hundred miles in eastern Kansas, the Flint Hills are among the last remaining tallgrass prairie ecosystems in the world.
While landowners in other parts of Kansas and states around it also burn rangeland, Brunetti said, the fires are of “significantly greater quantity” in the Flint Hills.
Flint Hills rancher Pete Ferrell said their protocol does not include yearly burning. They burn less consistently than other ranchers because they use high density stocking of beef cattle and a goat herd to control invasive species. He said they had already decided not to burn this year when health officials made their request.
“So no, that was not a factor for us, although I have shared that concern with neighbors, with associates who do burn,” Ferrell said.
It is not possible yet to say definitively whether smoke impacts have changed in Nebraska because of the recommendation by Kansas health officials to not burn, said Amanda Woita, spokeswoman for the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy. Nebraska would not have “a full picture” until after the burn season ends, she said.
KDHE spokeswoman Kristi Zears said Kansas health department officials are encouraging landowners in the Flint Hills to use the smoke model tool to alleviate impacts to downwind communities.
“This is especially important with the current coronavirus pandemic affecting fellow Kansans and surrounding states,” Zears said.
By Roxana Hegeman

OWH Editorial: Virus hits Nebraska petition drives. State should consider signature innovations

The coronavirus emergency has transformed our personal lives in unimagined ways. It's doing the same to Nebraska's political life: With social distancing and other necessary health restrictions now in place, Nebraska ballot-petition drives are finding it increasingly difficult to gather signatures.
This week the group behind an initiative petition seeking to cut property taxes by 35% ended its effort, stymied by the virus conditions. Organizers for other campaigns — on medical marijuana, casino gambling — say they still aim to meet the signature requirements by a July 2 deadline, though they currently have suspended collection efforts.
Nebraska is by no means unique in this regard. Petition drives are running into the same virus-emergency problems in states including Arizona (minimum wage, campaign finance transparency), North Dakota (marijuana legalization) and California (too many to list).
The right of Nebraskans to use citizen-driven ballot measures to decide statewide policy questions has been firmly rooted in the state constitution since 1912. Nebraskans can enact laws or constitutional amendments through the power of initiative. Among the many examples are, in recent years, minimum wage increases approved in 2014 and Medicaid expansion approved in 2018.
The constitution also empowers Nebraskans to overturn acts of the state legislation through the power of referendum. A majority of voters did so in 2016 by restoring the death penalty after the Legislature had voted to end capital punishment.
Some states use innovative approaches for signature collection. In Oregon, voters can download a petition sheet online, sign it on paper and mail it to the state. In Utah, a gubernatorial executive order allows campaigners to use fax and email to get their petitions to the public. In Seattle, a petition campaign has mailed petitions to residents and instructed them to send it back signed. In Arizona, ballot measure campaigns say the state should allow online signatures for petitions using a system that already allows online signature collections for candidate nominations.
Nebraska should scrutinize and debate these and other options for signature collection, to support a right our constitution has safeguarded for more than a century.

OWH Midlands Voices: Partnership between UNO and Legislature analyzes key state issues

Bartle, Ph.D., is dean of the College of Public Affairs and Community Service at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Schafer, Ph.D., is director of UNO's Center for Public Affairs Research.
As researchers at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, we appreciate your April 12 editorial about the importance of the "rainy day fund" (RDF) for Nebraska's state budget. While Nebraska has a good reputation for fiscal prudence, maintaining an average RDF balance of 15.2% from 2007 to 2017, the fund fell to 8% in 2018 and 7% in 2019. In ongoing meetings with the Nebraska Legislature's Planning Committee, a committee developed with the intent to explore the long-term trends that impact Nebraska, the lawmakers have expressed considerable concern about this decline. The alarm they sounded was heeded by the full Legislature, which acted over the past two years to increase the fund balance to healthier levels.
In general, long-term planning is not overly exciting, but its importance is no more obvious than in times like these.
For over 10 years, the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research has provided the Legislature's Planning Committee a series of data-driven reports on numerous state issues like water quality, energy, K-12 finance, pediatric cancer and local government pensions, to name a few. This data-based research helps serve as a basis for identifying future issues that, if

addressed early, can be solved in an orderly way.
Consistently, the topic of rainy day funds was identified for research. In our most recent report to the Legislature's Planning Committee, our research suggested four options to continue to build the rainy day fund and ensure a fiscal safety net in difficult times.
Maintaining robust state planning capacity is essential to good fiscal and program management. In our work with the Planning Committee, it has become apparent that most of the issues facing our state can be solved with foresight and efficient management of financial, human and natural resources. As we look to the end of this global pandemic and plan for the future, we believe the Planning Committee has never had a more important role to the State of Nebraska.
By John R. Bartle and Josie Schafer

OWH: Herd immunity fiasco

What have State Sens. Halloran of Hastings and Erdman of Bayard been doing in their spare time, playing golf? Have they read any information about COVID-19 or watched the news lately?
If they want us all to become infected so we can develop "herd immunity," I am curious as to which 6-10% of the herd they are willing to cull to achieve that? Seniors? The homeless? Health care workers? Which of their family members are they willing to sacrifice on the altar of the almighty dollar so we can all get back to business as usual?
Thank God for Gov. Ricketts and Dr. Adi Pour and all the other experts we are so lucky to have in Nebraska. As for the aforementioned senators, why don't you go visit a hospital in Grand Island and pitch your idea to the doctors there?
Nancy Dickinson, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 4/17: Virus should lead senators to take new look at taxes

While property tax relief for Nebraska's farmers and ranchers remains sorely needed, the coronavirus has very likely killed the bill that has, for months, been the focus of the Legislature's property tax relief efforts.
An amendment to LB1106 from Sen. Lou Ann Linehan, the bill's primary sponsor, proposes that $120 million received by the state from income and sales taxes be diverted to schools to reduce property taxes.
With the unprecedented instant drop in economic activity and the accompanying record increase in unemployment filings triggered by the virus, state tax receipts will be significantly lower than anticipated for at least three months and, realistically, far more.
That, put simply, means that the state will not have sufficient income to fund the property tax relief proposal without decimating the remainder of the discretionary budget -- the part that funds the University of Nebraska and state agencies, whose services will be needed in the upcoming recovery.
With economists predicting that the coronavirus shutdown has pushed the national economy into a recession that could very well be deep and long, the long-term spending envisioned in the bill, some $680 million over three years is also unlikely to be available.
Combine that fiscal realism with the political reality surrounding the bill and it is hard to find a reason why the Legislature should spend any more time debating an effectively dead proposal.
As of last week, with the Legislature in recess, Linehan said there has been no movement of senators on either side of the bill. Enough opposition to LB1106 exists to prevent it from overcoming a

filibuster, and more discussion of what could happen if the bill doesn't pass isn't likely to change any votes.
So it is time to pull LB1106 out of limbo, put it on the shelf and spend the time between sessions taking an overall look at Nebraska's tax policy and crafting a bill, with input from all affected parties, not simply a group of senators, that addresses property tax relief by rebalancing property taxes with sales and income taxes.
That effort should also look at changing the way agricultural land is valued, moving from a sales basis to production-based system, as is the policy in most surrounding states.
K-12 education, the primary recipient of property tax funds, shouldn't be exempt from the examination as well. But any plan that emerges should not hamstring schools or severely cut anticipated revenues for some districts as did LB1106.
That's admittedly a tall order. But property tax relief will still be needed after LB1106 meets its ultimate fate and should be one of the priorities in the 2021 legislative session.

LJS Local View: Time to act on prison reform

Dear Gov. Pete Ricketts:
We thank you for inviting Corrections Director Scott Frakes to your COVID-19 briefing on April 10.
The massive misfortune of this global pandemic gives us the opportunity to work together, innovatively, toward prison reform.
Nebraska has long been noted for excellence in dealing with terrible epidemics, and we could be a standard bearer for prison reform that maintains community safety, offers preventative supports for those most vulnerable to lives of incarceration and features rehabilitation.
Many tens of thousands of Nebraskans support changes, including decarceration, particularly those who have friends and family who are or have been incarcerated.
Many have stopped to encourage our vigil across from the Nebraska State Penitentiary. Mr. Frakes is absolutely correct — it does not serve people to rush them out of prison in times of a pandemic without adequate housing and community support.
We are not pressing you to release persons who have nowhere to go and who are not prepared for life in the free world. We are committed to reducing Nebraska's relatively low level of incarceration by half within 10 years, without leading to a higher crime rate.
We are calling upon you, Governor Ricketts, to work with Mr. Frakes and with the wardens, chaplains, activities coordinators and case managers at each of our prisons to identify persons who, serving long sentences, have amassed long, positive records free of any major disciplinary sanctions; who still have strong family and community connections; who are now over 60 or have medical issues; and arrange to let them parole immediately to their families.
The lifers' organizations have compiled lists of their members that could serve as a starting point for identifying such people who are ripe for release. Please listen to them.
Please move up the parole dates of those men and women who have their plans in place and have secured places to live, though we realize all congregate living facilities are facing special strains at the moment. We are particularly concerned about those persons who are at high risk of contracting a serious case of COVID-19 because of their age or health status. For the current emergency, we can identify prison residents who can be released without any harm to themselves or the rest of the state.
Yes — we do want the decarcerated to move in next door to us! Sentence lengths are not related to

practical goals such as deterrence, rehabilitation or even punishment. U.S. sentences, even in Nebraska, are far heavier than those in any other Western democracy.
Most inmates, especially those who are older or medically frail, would long since have been released in other countries (which generally have lower violent crime rates than the U.S. Prison is not a good deterrent.) We can live better with much less incarceration, just as do the other Western democracies with whom we are usually proud to identify ourselves, the "Big Ten" of the world.
Please direct Mr. Frakes that, when he makes his next daily call to the wardens around the state, he ask for a task force in each prison to identify those people who can be safely released. Please move immediately with an emergency proclamation and directions to the Parole Board and the Board of Pardons to begin processing whatever is necessary to move all who are safe to move out of the prisons.
As an organization dedicated to human rights advocacy work, Stand in for Nebraska (including Stand in for Lincoln, Stand in for Omaha, and the Nebraska Poor People's Campaign) seeks the latest, most innovative and humane approaches in the field of criminal justice, as do you and Mr. Frakes.
Thank you for your ongoing concern with the correctional system and for your support of Mr. Frakes's dedication to rehabilitation and education.
Sarah L. Sawin Thomas lives in Lincoln and is co-founder of Stand in for Nebraska, a human rights advocacy organization.

LJS: It's almost too late to get ahead

I would like to advise Gov. Pete Ricketts that in my opinion it is not sufficient to try to "slow the spread of the virus" with less than all-out social contact limitation now.
The crux of the spread in this country has been too little, too late on many fronts. We are so blessed in Nebraska to have such a light case load, but we are watching the tornado on the "odds that it won't come my way; I can duck into nearby shelter if it does."
Evidence is mounting on the insidious ways and times this coronavirus can spread before it wreaks havoc. Let's all take care.
Dr. David Arunski, Lincoln

Kearney Hub: Six rules will keep us healthy

We commend Gov. Pete Ricketts for his decisive and insightful leadership as Nebraskans tackle the COVID-19 crisis. During his daily coronavirus briefings, Ricketts has demonstrated a masterful grasp of the situation, and his matter-of-fact responses to questions from the press leave Nebraskans with unvarnished facts. It's the kind of information that helps people sign on with the statewide strategy, which is key in fighting the spread of the virus.
As Ricketts has stressed repeatedly, the most powerful weapon against the coronavirus is personal responsibility. When every Nebraskan protects himself from the virus, it protects others. If there is a weakness in Nebraska's response, it is ignorance. Each of us should check with our families and friends and make certain they know what to do to fight COVID-19.
In regards to ignorance, the author of a recent letter to the editor exposed a lack of understanding and knowledge about Nebraska's strategy. The writer called for large family gatherings to celebrate Easter, but that idea could expose people to the coronavirus.
It was during a large quinceañera to celebrate a girl's 15th birthday when the virus was handed a

substantial toehold in Hall County. People came for the celebration from miles away, and some apparently were carrying the virus. Two weeks after the quincineara — the incubation period for coronavirus — some people from the party became sick. Some carried the virus to their jobs at a Grand Island packing plant, and now Hall County is a hot spot.

The key to beat the virus is isolation and patience. This week Ricketts repeated his call for Nebraskans to stay apart. During the next week, the virus is expected to peak, so these six rules have added importance:

1) Stay home. No nonessential errands and no social gatherings. Respect the 10-person limit.
2) Work from home or use the 6-foot rule as much as possible in the workplace.
3) Shop alone and only shop once a week.
4) Help kids follow social distancing. Play at home. No group sports. And no playgrounds.
5) Help seniors stay at home by shopping for them.
6) Exercise daily at home or with an appropriately socially distanced activity.

"These six rules," Ricketts said, "will unite Nebraskans in our shared goal of slowing the spread of the virus as we pass through its peak period."

Nebraskans with a cough, fever or shortness of breath should stay home and contact their medical provider. People with pre-existing conditions, including severe asthma, heart disease, a compromised immune system, diabetes and lung disease should remain home.

The elderly or people with health conditions can reach out to family, friends, coworkers or churches for help with shopping and meal delivery, Ricketts said.

OWH: Donors increasingly line up behind possible Bacon-Eastman rematch for Omaha's House seat

Omaha Democrat Kara Eastman headed into the final month of her three-way congressional primary with all the financial advantages of a favorite.

Eastman raised $281,000 in the first quarter of 2020, an edge in campaign cash that helped her air television ads a week ahead of her closest opponent, Omaha lawyer Ann Ashford. Eastman, a former nonprofit executive, lists $138,000 cash on hand.

She said in a statement that she was "humbled by the grassroots contributions to my campaign," including from people who gave during the financial uncertainty caused by the novel coronavirus.

The House primary's two other Democrats, Ashford and Omaha restaurateur Gladys Harrison, have struggled raising funds, even before pandemic-related shutdowns that experts said benefited better-known politicians.

Last quarter, Ashford loaned her campaign $45,000 so it could advertise on cable and broadcast TV, her Federal Election Commission filing shows. She raised another $47,000 in the quarter and listed $15,000 cash on hand.

Harrison, who owns Big Mama's Kitchen, raised $4,852 from January through the end of March, documents show. Her campaign has said she has no plans to run TV ads. She listed $1,275 in cash on hand.

All three Democrats trail incumbent Rep. Don Bacon's fundraising in the 2nd Congressional District. Bacon, a retired Air Force brigadier general, raised $308,000 last quarter. His campaign lists $819,660 in cash on hand.

Bacon's lone challenger in the Republican Party primary is perennial candidate Paul Anderson, who left a race for Omaha City Council in 2017 after saying he didn't think Muslims should be allowed to

worship in the U.S.
So far in this election cycle, Eastman has raised nearly $750,000, outpacing Ashford by about half a million dollars and Harrison by more, despite not accepting donations from corporate political action committees.
Ashford and Harrison have criticized Eastman for looking past them to a possible general election rematch with Bacon. He bested her in 2018 by 4,945 votes, in part by labeling her too extreme for a swing district.
Eastman's focus this primary season has been on building a campaign that knocked on every door she wanted to reach at least once before COVID-19 limited campaign efforts to video and voice calls and direct mail.
Eastman built her war chest with some help from national groups raising funds for progressives, including those aligned with Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y.
Eastman's campaign has defended its approach to fundraising, saying that Nebraskans make up most of its donors and total donations. Bacon's campaign has said he draws support from more Nebraskans.
Eric Aspengren, a spokesman for the Ashford campaign, said both Eastman and Bacon draw too much support from out of state. Ashford, he said, raises money mainly from Nebraska.
Open Secrets and the Center for Responsive Politics were still updating their fundraising numbers to include the most recent quarter. Through the end of last year, Eastman and Bacon had raised more than half of their money from out of state. Ashford had raised 87% from Nebraska, it said.
In this cycle, Bacon has raised nearly $1.4 million, including money from corporate PACs that typically favor incumbents.
Nebraska's primary is May 12, and the state plans to have the polls open for in-person voting. Gov. Pete Ricketts and state election officials have urged people to vote by mail. Thousands are requesting ballots.
By Aaron Sanderford

AP: Trump gives governors a plan to open economy

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump gave governors a road map Thursday for recovering from the economic pain of the coronavirus pandemic, laying out "a phased and deliberate approach" to restoring normal activity in places that have strong testing and are seeing a decrease in COVID-19 cases.
"We're starting our life again," Trump said during his daily press briefing. "We're starting rejuvenation of our economy again."
The new guidelines are aimed at easing restrictions in areas with low transmission of the coronavirus, while holding the line in harder-hit locations. They make clear that the return to normalcy will be a far longer process than Trump initially envisioned, with federal officials warning that some social distancing measures may need to remain in place through the end of the year to prevent a new outbreak.
Places with declining infections and strong testing would begin a three-phase gradual reopening of businesses and schools.
In phase one, for instance, the plan recommends strict social distancing for all people in public. Gatherings larger than 10 people are to be avoided and nonessential travel is discouraged.
In phase two, people are encouraged to maximize social distancing and limit gatherings to no more

than 50 people unless precautionary measures are taken. Travel could resume.
Phase three envisions a return to normalcy for most Americans, with a focus on identification and isolation of any new infections.
The guidelines recommend that states reach "checkpoints" that look at new cases, testing and surveillance data over the prior 14 days before advancing from one phase to another.
At the earliest, the guidelines suggest, some parts of the country could see a resumption in normal commerce and social gatherings after a month of evaluating whether easing up on restrictions has led to a resurgence in virus cases.
In briefing governors on the plan, Trump said they were going to be responsible for deciding when it is safe to lift restrictions in their states. Just days before, he had drawn swift pushback for claiming that he had absolute authority to determine how and when states reopen.
The guidelines also include general recommendations to businesses as they plan for potential re-openings.
Those most susceptible to the respiratory disease are advised to remain sheltered in place until their area enters the final phase.
Governors, for their part, have been moving ahead with their own plans for how to safely revive normal activity. Seven Midwestern governors announced Thursday that they will coordinate on reopening their economies. Similar pacts were announced earlier in the week in the West and Northeast.
Trump also held conference calls Thursday with lawmakers he named to a new congressional advisory task force on reviving the economy. The economic costs were clear in new federal data showing that at least 22 million Americans have been thrown out of work in the past month. But the legislators repeatedly urged the president not to sacrifice public health by moving too quickly.
The federal government envisions a gradual recovery from the virus, in which disruptive mitigation measures may be needed in some places at least until a vaccine is available — a milestone unlikely to be reached until sometime next year.
A big testing ground for Trump's road map could be Texas, where Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, who has stuck close to federal guidance throughout the crisis, will lay out his reopening plan Friday. Abbott has said the process will be gradual, but he is facing pressure from conservative lawmakers to get Texas back to work.
The White House proposal presented Thursday is different from what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended last week, according to a draft of the recommendation obtained by the Associated Press. The CDC talked about using more specific criteria and in many cases looking for improvement over longer periods of time before easing restrictions in high-transmission areas. Examples include wanting to see sustained reductions over 30 days in positive tests for coronavirus.

AP: Coronavirus economy news: 'No industry that is immune'; governors partner on reopening

WASHINGTON (AP) — First, it was bars, restaurants, hotels. And clothing stores, movie theaters, entertainment venues. And countless small businesses, from bookstores to barbershops.
Now, the record flood of layoffs unleashed by the viral outbreak is extending beyond the services industries that bore the initial brunt and are still suffering most. White-collar employees, ranging from software programmers and legal assistants to sales associates and some health care workers,

are absorbing layoffs or salary cuts. So are workers in other occupations, like construction and real estate.

The mounting toll of job losses resulted last week in 5.2 million new applications for unemployment benefits, the Labor Department said Thursday. That raised the total number of laid-off workers in the month since the virus all but shut down the economy to 22 million — by far the worst run of U.S. job losses on record.

"There really is no industry that is immune from the effects of the outbreak," said Daniel Zhao, senior economist at job listings website Glassdoor.

Some economists say the unemployment rate could reach as high as 20% in April.

Rural suffering

An overwhelming majority of bankers in rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states expect the outbreak to push their local areas into recession, according to a survey released Thursday.

The overall index for the region plummeted from March's already anemic 35.5 to 12.1 in April — the lowest index recorded since the survey began in January 2006. Any score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey, said more than 9 in 10 bankers surveyed expect the measures being taken to fight the coronavirus to lead to a recession. Bankers from states including Nebraska and Iowa were surveyed.

States unite

Seven governors from the country's midsection announced Thursday that they will coordinate on reopening their state economies amid the coronavirus pandemic, after similar pacts were made in the Northeast and on the West Coast.

The latest agreement includes Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Kentucky. All together, the 17 states covered by the three partnerships are home to nearly half of the country's population.

Suspended service

The service sector may have been changed forever by the outbreak. J.C. Penney is postponing a $12 million interest payment. Hilton has suspended operations at almost 1,000 hotels globally, or 16% of them. That includes 12% of hotels in the Americas.

Sales slide

Figures released by the U.S. this week revealed a retail sector staring down a crisis.

The market for used cars, trucks and SUVs in the U.S. has evaporated. Cox Automotive estimates that retail used vehicle sales fell 59% last week compared with a year ago. Sales at Cox's Manheim used vehicle auction houses, where dealers get their supplies, tumbled 75%.

A nice aroma

For the first time since going drive-thru only on March 20, Starbucks is looking at a very gradual expansion of service. CEO Kevin Johnson said in a letter to employees Thursday that decisions would be made on a store-by-store basis.

AP: 'I'm starting to stress a bit': Small business loan program is out of money for now

NEW YORK (AP) — The government's lending program for small businesses is tapped out, and business owners who still need loans are waiting on Congress to approve more funding.

The fight in Congress over the extension is along party lines. Republicans want a relatively narrowly drawn infusion of $250 billion in funding into the program, but top Democrats are seeking to add

funding for hospitals and state and local governments.
With the stalemate, the business payroll subsidy program likely won't get funding until next week at the earliest.
The Small Business Administration said Thursday that it reached the $349 billion lending limit for the program, after approving nearly 1.7 million loans.
Thousands of small business owners whose loans have not yet been processed must now look to Congress to approve a Trump administration request for more money. Business owners left in limbo were getting more anxious after hearing the program was on hold.
"Ugh. I'm starting to stress a bit," said Greg Corey, who applied when the program launched April 3. He last heard from his bank on Saturday. Corey, owner of Porchlight, an Atlanta-based advertising and marketing firm, has been cutting expenses and work for freelancers so he can keep paying his staff of 10.
Meanwhile, thousands of other businesses are still applying, hoping to get loans when the program is extended. While they wait, some banks continue to accept and process applications that will be forwarded to the SBA. Others were putting their application processes on hold.
Although the halt to the program is expected to be temporary, it is another frustration for owners whose loan money has been delayed by a series of obstacles.
The crush of applications caused technological problems at the SBA and a backlog at banks. Many of those who applied received little or no information about the status of their applications.
"I am annoyed at how poorly executed this process has been," said Ashley Hunter, managing director of HM Risk Group, an insurance underwriter based in Austin, Texas. She said her bank has not contacted her about her application.

Thursday, April 16, 2020

TV and Radio
WNAX: Nebraska Governor Pete Rickets Resists Call to "Open Up" the State
KMTV: Health Director disappointed with NE Crossing reopening plans
KLKN: Local bar stays open by selling alcoholic drinks to-go
10/11: State employees demanding safer workplace conditions with petition
WOWT: Nebraska state employees petition the governor
KMTV: State employees deliver 1,700 petitions to Gov. Ricketts
KLKN: State workers asking Ricketts to sign petition for safer working standards through COVID-19
NET: Ricketts Resists More State Work From Home; Carter Optimistic On Football
NCN: Executive Order Aims to Provide Childcare Relief for Nebraskans
KETV: Gov. Ricketts signs order that allows day cares to be reimbursed
NET: Thousands Of Nebraskans Battle Diabetes
NCN: Senator Steve Erdman discusses letter about COVID-19 response
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KSNB: UNK prepares residence halls to be quarantine units
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LJS: Ricketts appoints new Lancaster County juvenile court judge

Lancaster County juvenile court judge.
White, 38, founded White Law Office and is an alternate chairperson for the Lancaster County Mental Health Board. Before that, she was a law clerk at Cada, Froscheiser, Cada & Hoffman law firm.
The University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate is a member of three bar associations — Lincoln Bar Association, Nebraska Bar Association and the American Bar Association — and is also a past president of the Nebraska Lawyers Trust Account Foundation.
She has been active as a member of Rotary and St. Paul United Methodist Church, served on the board for the Northeast Family Center and worked with the Cooper YMCA and the Lancaster County Child Advocacy Center.
She will replace Judge Toni Thorson, who retired.
By Sadiyah Ali

LJS: You may be wondering: Who is that woman you see so much these days with the governor?

American Sign Language interpreter Frances Beaurivage has been around awhile, but she's become more noticed over the last month.
She's been a major player in Gov. Pete Ricketts' daily coronavirus briefings, and sometimes shows up during briefings by Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird, quietly ensuring that people in the deaf community know all the information others do about the deadly virus.
"Her work has gotten rave reviews from everyone I've heard from," said Ricketts spokesman Taylor Gage.
Information and education are power, she would tell you.
Ricketts wanted to show appreciation for the woman standing about 6 feet from him every day, and to recognize April 15 as American Sign Language Day. So he awarded Beaurivage on Wednesday with an admiralty in the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska.
"Thank you for all your great work, Frances," he told her.
Nebraska state employees not giving up on requests for more safeguards and added pay
She wants to be the giver of information, not the recipient of attention. So Ricketts surprised her with the admiralty. It only took a few seconds, maybe made her blush a little. She signed during the entire short presentation, along with a couple of thank-you signs, then continued with more COVID-19 messages.
How many times has she signed "wash your hands," "stay home," "stay healthy and connected"? We'll just assume many. Beaurivage spurns interview requests.
But she's quite engaged in the community, with appointments and freelance interpreter jobs focused around her work with children, youth and adults. Access is power, she believes.
In a confirmation hearing a year ago for an appointment with the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, for which she also worked at one time, the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee learned a little about Beaurivage.

She was raised by deaf parents, and that shaped her lifelong involvement with the deaf community, she told them.
"It's a passion of mine to give back to that community," she said.
She has worked with youth and children in public schools, and for Boys Town Research Hospital as the director of the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment, a test of a person's ability to interpret effectively for young students in the classroom.
The test began as a local one, then was used by a few states and then by the entire country and some areas of Canada.
"And the reason that that's really, really important is that children are going to grow up and be taxpayers and be citizens," she said. "And ensuring that they have access to their education is paramount. If you have a really good teacher in a classroom and you do not have an effective interpreter, that child does not have access to their education."
She also worked at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as an interpreter coordinator for undergraduates and graduate-level students, including Ph.D. candidates.
At the university, she said, some freshmen were coming in without the right amount of preparation from the K-12 setting and needed help to succeed in higher education, she said.
Working with adults, Beaurivage also has seen the lack of access and the underemployment of many deaf people.
That includes access to many things others take for granted — going to the doctor's office, the dentist's office, and being able to watch the TV news with closed captioning to know what's going on in their city and state.
"We've made so many strides in a short time from the time that I was being raised by deaf parents to what you see today," she said.
By JoAnne Young

LJS: Ricketts begins business recovery planning with online survey

In preparation for mapping a plan for economic recovery from the crushing impact of the coronavirus, Gov. Pete Ricketts on Wednesday launched a business recovery survey that will gather information and suggestions online.
Ricketts said he's seeking information on "how this has impacted business operations (as) we think about planning for future growth."
Recovery will be "a team effort," the governor said during his daily news briefing on the coronavirus and the state's efforts to manage the pandemic.
New state government revenue figures demonstrate that "the Nebraska economy was really humming along" until the virus hit, Ricketts said.
The business recovery survey is being conducted at bit.ly/NE-Biz-Survey-2020.
As the calendar moves into the final two weeks of April, when the virus is expected to peak in the state, the governor is looking ahead to the beginning of recovery without making any decisions yet on when he will lift social or physical distancing restrictions, including bans on service inside restaurants and bars.
Ricketts said he expects to open up "incrementally, a little bit at a time" without removing all restrictions at once.
"We're going to try to phase this in," he said.
Meanwhile, Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha wrote the governor a letter urging him to issue a stay-at-home order now in view of the announcement that Nebraska Crossing Outlets intends to reopen its

operations along Interstate 80 between Lincoln and Omaha on April 24.
"This can only happen in the absence of a stay-at-home order issued by your office," Lathrop wrote. "I urge you in the strongest terms to order Nebraskans to stay at home unless they are engaged in essential activities and to allow the return of non-essential businesses once health professionals believe we are adequately prepared to safely allow movement within businesses across the state."
"In many ways," Ricketts suggested during his briefing, "we've been more restrictive than other states" and evidence suggests that "the plan is working."
Ricketts pointed to the assessment that Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, made that Nebraska's policy of shutting down schools, limiting gatherings to no more than 10 people, encouraging people to work from home and implementing physical distancing standards is "functionally equivalent" to shelter-at-home orders in most other states.
Nebraska's plan depends on "people exercising personal responsibility and civic duty," the governor said, "not the heavy hand of government."
While the restrictions appear to be working, Ricketts said, "we need to do more testing" to identify people who may be infected by the virus and, in turn, test the people who have been in contact with them in order to control and prevent its spread.
Acquiring testing materials, primarily reagents, has been a challenge, the governor said, but the state is actively pursuing a number of channels "and I feel like we're making progress."
So far, Ricketts said, the state is meeting its goal of "not overwhelming the health care system."
Dr. Gary Anthone, the state's chief medical officer, said 50% of the state's hospital beds remain unoccupied.
The hot spot is CHI St. Francis in Grand Island, where seven patients have been transferred to other hospitals and 17 patients are on ventilators.
"We have the cooperation of every hospital in the state to do inter-hospital transfers," Anthone said.
University of Nebraska President Ted Carter said the university is ready to do its part in helping "bring our economy back," working in large part through its research activities.
The university is a key partner in the business recovery research project announced by the governor.
Bryan Slone, president of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said the hardest-hit businesses in the state are Main Street businesses such as restaurants, as well as retail stores.
Slone suggested Nebraskans join gift card campaigns that are now underway to help support local businesses.
Stephanie Beasley, director of the Division of Children and Family Services in the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, announced the state will launch two initiatives to assist families receiving child care subsidies during this period of economic stress.
One would provide for subsidized child care at home and the other would help sustain child care providers with financial support even if the child who is normally subsidized is not there.
Ricketts announced that 18,565 Nebraska businesses have applied for $2.7 billion in federal loans that are available under the economic stimulus package recently approved by Congress. Those forgivable loans are designed to keep people employed.
Rounding out the briefing, Carter was asked whether he expected Nebraska to be able to play football this fall.
"I'm looking forward to football back in Memorial Stadium with some number of fans there," he said. "I'm optimistic for now.
"And I'm optimistic that we will have students on campus in the fall."

By Don Walton

AP: Nebraska officials seek business input for virus recovery

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska state officials and business groups on Wednesday asked companies and nonprofits to outline what can be done to help them recover financially after the coronavirus pandemic subsides.

The Department of Economic Development, the University of Nebraska and the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry released a survey that asks business owners and nonprofits whether they plan to cut staff, what their top concerns are and whether they plan to seek federal assistance, among other questions.

"This is an opportunity for Nebraska businesses to have their voices heard and to be able to share with us what's going on as we think about how we plan for future growth," Gov. Pete Ricketts said at a news conference.

University of Nebraska President Ted Carter said the university will start compiling the answers as soon as they're received.

"We're very hopeful that people will start filling out those surveys to help bring businesses back to life," he said.

Nebraska had 901 confirmed coronavirus cases and 20 deaths as of Tuesday evening, according to data compiled by the state Department of Health and Human Services. More than 10,800 people have tested negative. Nebraska reported 34 new cases on Tuesday, down from 64 the day before.

Also Wednesday, the Nebraska state employees' union delivered more than 1,600 petitions to Gov. Pete Ricketts' office demanding that he give all state workers the option to work from home if their jobs allow it.

The petitions also call for an extra $2 an hour in "hazard pay" for those who have to work in-person during the coronavirus pandemic. The petition was a follow-up to a letter the union sent to Ricketts earlier this month with the same demands.

"State employees are concerned and they are anxious," said Justin Hubly, executive director of the Nebraska Association of Public Employees. "We need the governor to take action to ensure their safety."

Hubly said the only safeguard in some state offices is a bottle of hand sanitizer. The union has also questioned why call-center employees aren't allowed to do their jobs from home.

Ricketts, a Republican, has said it isn't possible for all state employees to work from home because the state still has to provide essential services. He has said employees with concerns about their work environment should talk to their managers.

"We've got a lot of people who are working very, very hard in very trying circumstances," Ricketts said Wednesday when asked about the petitions. "These folks are doing their part, and we've got to do our part."

By Grant Schulte

LJS: Nebraska state employees not giving up on requests for more safeguards and added pay

State employees delivered petitions with more than 1,600 signatures to Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts on Wednesday, asking again for more protections and a pay differential for those who must work in

office buildings and engage in person with the public.
The Nebraska Association of Public Employees, which represents more than 8,000 state workers, asked for more safeguards last week because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ricketts said Wednesday at his daily briefing that 30% of state workers are working from home.
But many state workers have important jobs — processing SNAP benefits, unemployment benefits, tax refunds — that can only be done on-site, just like truck drivers, grocery clerks, law enforcement and health care workers, according to Ricketts.
"Those folks are doing their part and we've got to do our part at the state of Nebraska," he said.
Meanwhile, union leaders continue to hear from worried members statewide, said Nebraska Association of Public Employees Executive Director Justin Hubly.
“In some places, the only safeguard in place is a bottle of hand sanitizer,” he said. “State employees are concerned, and they are anxious. We need the governor to take action to ensure their safety.”
The requests come at a time when Nebraska has recorded more than 950 coronavirus cases and 23 deaths. Close to 500 of those cases are in the Omaha and Grand Island areas. And the peak of cases is not expected until early May, according to some models.
Lincoln officials have said that with community transmission of the coronavirus accounting for about 70% of confirmed cases, Lancaster County residents should assume they are at risk of contracting it while they are out in public.
So state workers want the governor to allow all state employees who can to work from home, to close offices to the public while continuing to provide services by phone, and to immediately pay a $2 shift differential as hazard pay to workers who must report to work in person.
“In just five days, our members responded overwhelmingly by signing these petitions,” said Deb Strudl, Department of Health and Human Services specialist for Children and Family Services and union chairwoman.
Strudl said a lot of workers aren't wearing their masks inside the office because no one has directed them to do that, and they aren't keeping their proper distances. One employee came to work with a fever and cough and exposed her team, and was sent home, but other workers weren't told, she said.
Nebraskans need these workers now more than ever, she said, and they must be protected to continue their important work.
By JoAnne Young

OWH: State workers demand option to work at home; Ricketts says all workers who can already are

LINCOLN — Gov. Pete Ricketts and his top personnel aide pushed back Wednesday on demands by the state employees union that more workers be allowed to work from home.
An estimated 40% of all state employees are working remotely now, they said, though that number drops to about 25% at the state’s largest agency, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
Justin Hubly of the Nebraska Association of Public Employees said that an additional 2,000 state workers should, and could, be working from home now, and that he’s getting a lot of tearful calls from state workers and their loved ones.
“State employees are concerned, and they are anxious,” he said. “We need the governor to take action to ensure their safety.”

But Ricketts, as well as Jason Jackson, the governor's chief human relations officer, said that all state workers capable of working at home now are doing so, and that some essential tasks, like processing food stamp and unemployment applications, must be done at an office.
"The expectation of the people of Nebraska is that we're supposed to do these things. We're the state," Ricketts said.
In the case of Health and Human Services, a main target of complaints by the union, the software necessary to allow calls to be taken at home has limits, Jackson said. If more workers were allowed to work from home, the software could crash, disrupting essential services, he said.
"Right now, Nebraskans are relying on our services," Jackson said, adding that the state is working to increase the software capability.
The comments came after union officials, most wearing protective masks, delivered petitions signed by 1,600 workers and others to the governor's office Wednesday, demanding additional steps to keep workers safe from the coronavirus. The petitions follow a call by the union last week to allow state workers who are able to work from home to do so. The petitions also call for closing public counters and paying an extra $2 an hour in "hazard" pay for those who must report to an office or work site.
Hubly, whose union represents 8,000 state employees, said some employees work within arm's length of each other, and in some state offices, the only safeguard is a bottle of sanitizer hung on the front door. One photograph, shown to a reporter, shows four state workers facing each other in a pod of cubicles, with one of the work stations partitioned off by a makeshift cardboard barrier.
State employees at the State Veterans Home in Kearney, the State Penitentiary in Lincoln and the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in Kearney have tested positive for COVID-19.
Some state workers have asked why state offices still allow walk-in traffic while many city and county offices are conducting business by telephone and computer only. Department of Motor Vehicles offices, for instance, are operating by phone and mail only.
Jackson said that is a decision left to local managers, with the goal being to continue to offer services without disruptions.
HHS employees have complained about a rule, related in an email to workers, that 60% of the staff must report to the office. Jackson said that refers to the capacity of the state's software system to handle at-home employees.
By Paul Hammel

KETV: 'Our members are scared and are anxious'

As Gov. Pete Ricketts encourages Nebraskans to stay home, some state workers say they want him to follow his own advice.
On Wednesday, members of the Nebraska Association of Public Employees turned in a petition with 1,700 signatures. It calls on Ricketts to close down local service centers for two weeks, allow more employees to work from home and increase pay for those who can't by $2 an hour.
"Our members are scared and are anxious," said NAPE Executive Director Justin Hubly.
He showed photos of state employees working in cubicles that are closer than 6-feet apart. One staff member even constructed a cardboard barrier.
He said some older employees with pre-existing health conditions have not been allowed to work from home.
"They've asked their supervisor, 'Please let me work from home.' And the supervisor says, 'I can't

accommodate that request," Hubly said.
Union members said other businesses have given their workers a bump in salary for hazard pay. They also believe shutting down local service centers during the projected surge will protect the public.
"I can't go to my eye doctor right now, my eye doctor's office is closed. But I could go down to the DMV right now and put my face up against the eyeglass test and take the eyeglass test right now. I don't know if that needs to happen in the next two weeks," Hubly said.
The governor's response was quick and definitive.
"This gets back to the expectations to people in Nebraska. Hey, we're the state we're supposed to be doing these things. This is our job," Ricketts said.
Nebraska Department of Administrative Services Director Jason Jackson said 40% of state employees are working from home. He said that will expand as software glitches get fixed. He argued now would be the worst time to shutdown or reduce services.
"There's a lot of displacement in the workplace, a lot of families in need. Right now is not the time to contemplating raises to government employees or closing down services,"
Jackson said.
Deb Strudl works in adult protective services for the Department of Health and Human Services.
"We need to serve our clients. I am a frontline worker," Strudl said.
"I don't mind that. Would I like to be compensated, yeah, if I go home and infect my kids my grandkids something like that."
By Andrew Ozaki

OWH: Grand Island area now has highest number of coronavirus cases in Nebraska

The Grand Island area reached an unwanted milestone Wednesday: It had more confirmed coronavirus cases than anywhere else in Nebraska.
The Central District Health Department reported 278 known cases in Hall County, where Grand Island is, on Wednesday afternoon.
That exceeds the 263 cases reported the same day in the far more populous Douglas County.
Douglas County reported its first case on March 6. Hall County didn't report its first cases until nearly three weeks later, on March 26, showing how quickly the virus has taken hold and spread in the central Nebraska region.
The local health agency also oversees neighboring Merrick and Hamilton Counties, which have four and 15 total cases, respectively, for a total of 297 cases in the three counties.
An estimated 571,300 people live in Douglas County, roughly nine times Hall County's population of 61,000. On a per capita basis, Hall County actually has 10 times more cases than Douglas County.
In fact, though Douglas County has the second-highest number of cases in the state, its per capita rate is actually below the statewide average. And it's far below that of the state's biggest hot spots: Hall, Kimball, Adams and Custer Counties.
Hall County also reported its fifth death Wednesday, a man in his 80s who was hospitalized.
Clusters of the disease have cropped up at the massive JBS USA plant, where 3,600 workers clock in for shifts cutting and packaging beef, the McCain Foods frozen appetizer factory, nursing homes and a health clinic.
Forty workers or residents at nine long-term-care centers or home health agencies have tested positive for the coronavirus, including Tabitha, Wedgewood, Lakeview, Tiffany Square, Heritage,

Edgewood, Country House and Good Samaritan in Hall County and Westfield in Hamilton County, the health department said Wednesday.

The actual number of people infected is hard to tell and could be even higher.

Central District Health Department Director Teresa Anderson said the availability of testing in the Grand Island area remains very limited. The Nebraska National Guard assisted with swabbing people for testing last week, and Gov. Pete Ricketts said Guard members will return again this weekend.

A little more than 600 people have been tested in Hall County, according to figures from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, compared to more than 3,800 people in Douglas.

"We are hopeful that the number of much-needed COVID-19 tests will increase in the near future," Anderson said.

Earlier this week, data showed that 35% of those being tested in Hall County had the virus — much higher than the statewide average of 7.65%.

Health officials have said the number of confirmed cases will increase as a larger pool of people are tested.

Adams County and Hastings are just south of Grand Island, and many travel between the two cities to work or shop. Coronavirus cases there are also climbing, with 66 people testing positive as of Tuesday, including 12 workers at a Western Reserve beef processing facility in Hastings.

State and local officials said it's hard to pinpoint exactly why the Grand Island area has emerged as such a coronavirus hot spot.

But some of the largest employers in the area are food processing and manufacturing facilities, including plants for JBS, Hornady ammunition and Case New Holland farm machinery. Case New Holland temporarily shut down production last week to prevent the virus from spreading.

It's harder to follow social distancing guidelines on a production line.

"Grand Island stands on the front line in the fight against COVID-19 because we have many people employed in necessary jobs — manufacturing, food processing, agricultural equipment," Mayor Roger Steele said last week at a press conference. "While other cities can ask office workers to work from home, that is not an option for our workers."

Local doctors and Anderson have been warning for weeks that the number of cases would continue to rise and that there are most likely many more undetected cases in the community, given the testing shortage.

Anderson and Steele said they would have liked to institute a two-week shelter-at-home order to get a better handle on the virus, but Ricketts didn't support that approach.

The governor has said Nebraska's directed health measures, which have closed schools and dine-in areas at restaurants, and prohibited gatherings larger than 10 people, are similar to, and in some cases even stricter than, the stay-at-home orders enacted in other states.

Anderson has said she fears that the local health care system is just weeks away from being swamped, but administrators at St. Francis, the Grand Island hospital, say they are not there yet.

The hospital has erected a negative-pressure respiratory care unit in a tent outside the emergency room and could add 28 beds, expanding to a capacity of 157 beds, to care for additional patients.

At a press briefing Wednesday, Ricketts said three people at St. Francis were on ventilators for breathing support one week ago. That number has now risen to 17, he said. At least seven COVID-19 patients this week have been transferred to other hospitals, including ones in Omaha.

But St. Francis is not at capacity and staff members are staying calm and collected, said Ricketts and Dr. Gary Anthone, Nebraska's chief medical officer.

“We are deploying resources to be able to address it,” Ricketts said. “People are working very, very hard, in Grand Island, but the plan is working. We have not overwhelmed the health care system.”
By Erin Duffy

LJS: Pre-COVID-19 impact state tax report shows increases

here's this consolation for the Nebraska economy: March tax collections were up in all areas, which gives an idea that things were going pretty well before the coronavirus invaded.
The net sales, income, corporate and miscellaneous taxes were up 12% above the amount forecasters predicted. And the year's receipts were up nearly 9%.
Gross receipts compared with the forecast show sales taxes up nearly 14%, individual income taxes up 5.4%, corporate income taxes up 41.5% and miscellaneous taxes up 6.5%.
Comparisons are based on the forecast from July.
But there could be more painful news in the months to come.
Appropriations Committee Chairman John Stinner said last week the pandemic will cause a significant decrease in tax receipts for the state, and the effect could be felt up to three years.
Unemployment and Medicaid applications will go up in the months to come.
At the same time, the federal coronavirus aid package could bring the state $1.25 billion.
Tax receipts for March have a 30-day lag in sales tax reporting, so they really indicate what was going on in February. The report for April will be more indicative of what is happening with restrictions on businesses and social gatherings amid the outbreak, said Revenue Department spokeswoman Lydia Brasch.
Net sales tax collections were up in March 9.4%, and farmers have already reported, because their deadline is before April 15, Brasch said.
As Gov. Pete Ricketts told Nebraskans during one of his COVID-19 updates, if you can pay your income taxes before the now-July 15 deadline, please do, she said.
By JoAnne Young

NET: Executive Order Aims To Help Struggling Childcare Providers & Low-Income Families

Gov. Pete Ricketts signed a two-part executive order Wednesday aimed at helping the struggling childcare industry.
Children and Family Services Director Stephanie Beasley said nearly 16% of childcare centers who work with the state have had to close due to the social distancing guidelines.
She said in response, in-home subsidized childcare is allowed, and the usual requirements will be temporarily waived.
"First, this provides an alternate option for a family who may have lost their childcare due to their provider or program closing," Beasley said. "And providing this option also provides employment opportunities for interested individuals who may have lost their unemployment from the COVID-19 pandemic."
The order also lets providers collect subsidy payments from the state even if those kids are absent. The child’s spot is also secured at the daycare when normal operations begin again.
By Kelsey Eihausen

NTV: Gov. Ricketts expands childcare options and releases business survey

LINCOLN, Neb. — Wednesday's Gov. Pete Rickett's COVID-19 press conference addressed expansion of childcare options and the launch of a business response survey.
Options for childcare are expected to grow for working families and relief given to childcare centers participating in the State's Child Care Subsidy Program after Gov. Ricketts issued an executive order to address the two state issues.
The order had suspended two regulation to the State's Child Subsidy Program.
Firstly, childcare centers can bill the state for the days a child is absent from care.
Secondly, families who participate in the program can receive in-home childcare when other option are unavailable.
Stephanie Beasley, Director of the Division of Children and Family Services (CFS) for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), joined the governor's press conference to explain the intent of the order.
Director Beasley stated, "As of this morning, 16 percent of licensed child care programs in Nebraska have temporary closed since the COVID-19 emergency declaration. This means that over 4,000 children whose families receive child care subsidy from the State may not have access to safe, high-quality care as their parents or guardians."
Guidance for childcare providers is available at www.dhhs.ne.gov/coronavirus
Read the executive order pertaining to the State's Child Care Subsidy Program by clicking here.
The business response survey is expected to gauge how Nebraska businesses are managing during this time. The survey was created by the State's Department of Economic Development in partnership with the University of Nebraska System; the Lincoln, Greater Omaha, and state chambers of commerce; the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska Omaha; and the Bureau of Business Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
Ted Carter, President of the University of Nebraska System discussed the survey during the press conference. Carter explained its purpose, the information it will collect and how the data will show the university's efforts to support businesses.
The survey is live now at cpar.unomaha.edu/nebusinessresponse
Full video of today's press briefing is available by clicking here.

WJAG: Gov. Ricketts signs executive order to help day care providers

LINCOLN - 481 or 16 percent of licensed child care programs in Nebraska have temporarily closed since the coronavirus emergency declaration.
That's according to Stephanie Beasley, Director of the Division of Children and Family Services with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
During the daily coronavirus press conference at the Capitol Thursday Governor Pete Ricketts said he has signed an executive order that will allow day cares to be reimbursed for children that aren't there because of the coronavirus or the 10 person or less rule.
"For example, you may have a parent who wasn't able to send that child to day care. Normally what would happen is that day care would not be reimbursed for that day. This executive order is a way for the DHHS to reimburse that day care to help day cares stay in business and hold that slot for the family so that they will be able to take advantage of that slot sometime in the future."
Ricketts said families receiving subsidies can use a license-exempt provider.

Also during the press conference, Ricketts talked about a new business response survey that businesses and non-profit organizations are encouraged to fill out and say how the virus has impacted their operation.
That survey can be filled out online at UNomaha.Edu.
By Cody Ronnfeldt

KLKN: Department of Labor issuing federal unemployment benefit payments

The Nebraska Department of Labor (NDOL) announced today that payments are being issued for the new federal unemployment insurance benefits provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The COVID-19 relief package temporarily provides an additional $600 per week in addition to Nebraska's regular unemployment benefit, which is about half of a person's full-time weekly income up to $440 per week for 26 weeks.
Additional $600 Per Week
As part of the CARES Act, unemployment benefits are being expanded to provide an additional $600 per week beginning the week ending April 4, 2020, through the week ending July 25, 2020. This temporary emergency increase in benefits is referred to as the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) program.
On Sunday, Nebraska issued the first $600 payments for the week ending April 11. Payments will be issued soon to individuals eligible for benefits the week ending April 4. The $600 is paid separately from regular unemployment insurance benefits, but no application is needed. Under federal guidelines, $600 payments cannot be issued for weeks of unemployment prior to the week ending April 4.
Anyone who currently has federal or state withholding tax taken out of their benefits will see the same reductions in the FPUC payment. Withholding preferences can be managed in NEworks.nebraska.gov. Other deductions, such as child support, also apply.
The additional $600 per week will also be paid to recipients of Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). This program provides benefits to those not traditionally eligible for unemployment benefits. Every unemployment claim is automatically reviewed for PUA eligibility. Further details regarding PUA will be announced soon.
Unemployment Insurance Waivers
Last week, Governor Pete Ricketts extended waivers to August 1 for COVID-19 unemployment insurance claims. These include the waiver of the requirement to search for work, the waiver of the requirement to serve a waiting week between claim processing and the first payment, and the waiver of employer benefit charges.
Filing A Claim
Any worker in a non-paid status due to COVID-19 may file a claim for unemployment insurance benefits. Unemployment claims in Nebraska are filed online at NEworks.nebraska.gov. The NEworks mobile app is available to download for free. After filing a new initial claim, applicants must certify their eligibility every week that they continue to be unemployed by logging into their NEworks account. These weekly certifications must be completed even while a new claim is still being processed.
More Information
Unemployment Insurance Instructional Materials
Previous Unemployment Insurance Announcements

Federal Benefits FAQ
COVID-19 Information
By Brent BonFleur

OWH: Douglas County reports 8 new cases of coronavirus, including one infant

Nebraska's coronavirus cases grew by 51 on Wednesday, and among the new infections was an infant in Douglas County.
A total of 952 cases had been reported to the state by Wednesday evening. Based on information provided by county health departments, Nebraska now totals 23 deaths, up one from Wednesday. The latest death occurred in Hall County, where the disease is spreading rapidly. A hospitalized man in his 80s died there, according to the Central District Health Department.
Phil Rooney, spokesman for the Douglas County Health Department, said a child less than a year old is among the eight new Douglas County cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.
Rooney said he could not elaborate on the baby's status, but he did say no one was hospitalized among the cases announced Wednesday.
Three had contact with a known infected person, one is believed to be related to travel, one was a community spread case and three remain under investigation.
Douglas County has reported 263 cases of COVID-19.
The Lincoln area recorded two more lab-confirmed cases, bringing the total in Lancaster County to 59, according to the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department. The new cases are people in their 20s and 60s.
By Nancy Gaarder

Scottsbluff SH: Two coronavirus cases tied to long-term care facilities in Panhandle

Panhandle Public Health District officials announced five new cases of the coronavirus Tuesday, including two that are tied to long-term care facilities.
Officials confirmed the first positive for COVID-19 in Morrill County, a woman in her 70s.
One new case has been announced in Cheyenne County, bringing the total cases there to three. The new case involves a man in his 60s. On Wednesday, Sidney Regional Medical Center confirmed that the case involved a resident at its facility. The resident had been screened after having suffered a sore throat. The resident's roommate tested negative and family members have been notified. Both the resident and roommate were transferred to the hospital's COVID unit, according to a press release.
Safety precautions had already been in place at the facility..
"The staff has been preparing for this situation and continue to operate under rigorous infection control procedures," Dr. Rebecca Allard, medical director for Extended Care, said. "The organization is taking every precaution to ensure the safety and well-being of our residents and staff."
Three new cases were also confirmed in Scotts Bluff County: two females, one in her 40s and the other in her teens; and one male, a teenage boy. The boy had been confirmed as having a positive test during National Guard testing last week. He had been identified as a close contact of a previously positive case, and having worked at a local long-term health facility. His close contacts have been notified and quarantined.

The West Nebraska Veterans Home confirmed in a press release that one of its staff members had tested positive and says that further testing is being conducted in coordination with Panhandle Public Health District (PPHD).
Employees at all four veterans' homes in the state have been completing screenings and having temperatures taken to check for COVID-19 symptoms upon entry of the facilities. When the employee indicated possible exposure to COVID-19, they were directed to self-isolate at home and PPHD was contacted to complete testing. WNVH is continuing to work with PPHD to screen and test any teammates and members who may have previously come into contact with the teammate who tested positive, according to the press release.
Scotts Bluff County has now reported a total of 17 positive cases of the coronavirus.
In the PPHD area, 32 cases of the coronavirus have been reported as positive among 640 tests completed. Thirteen people have recovered. A Kimball County man who had been hospitalized since the end of March has now been released from the hospital.
As of Wednesday, a total of 108 tests are pending results, with 87 new tests completed and submitted on Wednesday. In the new cases confirmed Tuesday, contact investigations are underway and officials said more details will be released when they are complete. PPHD officials reiterated in a daily briefing Wednesday that possible exposure would be defined as having contact with a person for 10 minutes or more and within 6 feet. PPHD director Kim Engel said that those changes will mean that fewer exposure locations are likely to be reported.
"The only time that we are listing on that site list is, it's kind of like the last resort. If they went someplace and they can't tell us who was all there, that is when we list it," PPHD director Kim Engel said. "... Some of that guidance that we were under has changed and people are able to recall who they were with."
People are reminded that dates of exposure might not be related to specific cases that have been announced. The possible exposure sites also usually include information about close contacts.
By Maunette Loeks

Fox Nebraska: More testing at Central Nebraska Veterans' Home after member tested positive for COVID-19

LINCOLN, Neb. — A member of the Central Nebraska Veterans' Home (CNVH) in Kearney tested positive for COVID-19.
Further testing on the member is being conducted in coordination with Two Rivers Public Health Department and the Nebraska National Guard.
The CNVH informs that their members at the four state Veterans homes have been completing daily screenings and having temperatures taken to check for COVID-19 symptoms.
After symptoms matching COVID-19 were noted in the CNVH member, the public health department was contacted to complete testing, and the member immediately began isolating in their private room.
CNVH stated that teammates and members who may have previously come into contact with the member are now being screened and tested.
CNVH informs all teammates working in the home where the member resides are donning N95 masks, gowns, and face shields. Teammates throughout the rest of the facility are masked per CDC and DHHS long-term care facility guidelines.
"We have been taking COVID-19 very seriously and have implemented policies, procedures, and

additional training in all four of our veterans homes to protect our members and teammates," said Nebraska Department of Veteran Affairs (NDVA) Director John Hilgert. "I want to thank the teammates working in our facilities, who are the frontline workers in the war on this virus and are the heroes helping heroes in a challenging time."

NDVA stated that protecting the health and safety of the members of the four state veterans' homes, as well as the teammates who serve them is a top priority.

The NDVA informs that the COVID-19 task force has been coordinating efforts in all four veterans' homes to limit the chances of contact with the coronavirus. Starting March 11, entry to the facilities was limited to NDVA teammates and medical professionals, who are required to complete a screening upon entry.

A "virtual visitor" system has been put in place to keep families connected while access for in-person visits is limited. All non-essential travel outside the facility was postponed and communal dining has been discontinued.

OWH: Nebraska education chief: School won't be normal in the fall

Will school get back to normal for Nebraska kids in the fall?

You know, the kind of school where hallways bustle with students, band members march shoulder to shoulder and football players get in each others' faces.

Don't count on it, officials say.

Nebraska Education Commissioner Matt Blomstedt is advising local district leaders to draw up contingency plans in case the coronavirus crisis lingers on.

"I don't believe it will be normal in the fall," Blomstedt said.

It's hard to say yet what the situation might look like this fall, but possibilities include delaying the start of the school year, separating students into groups and rotating them into school buildings at different times or using partial or complete distance learning.

Of course, there's still time between now and then for a medical breakthrough, a presidential reopening order or other event that could turn the tide against COVID-19 and clear the way for normal operations.

Most districts are slated to start in mid-August. The first day for students in the Omaha Public Schools is currently Aug. 18.

But even the start dates on the calendar are in question, as some officials have floated the idea of starting later in the fall or having only staff return in August to organize and prepare for whatever plan is put into effect to meet the health requirements.

Already, summer school is looking iffy, with some districts rescheduling later in the summer and reimagining how summer school might be delivered remotely.

"I think it's going to be very difficult to have summer school in June with students," Blomstedt said.

He said it's prudent for local officials to plan on disruptions in the fall. He wants them to be prepared and not wait until the last minute to draw up plans.

So, what might those plans look like?

Nothing's for certain yet — not by a long shot — but it's instructive to recall why schools closed in the first place.

The governor has said that schools are the most concentrated gatherings of people in the state. Closing them was to blunt the disease's spread.

Blomstedt said that unless there's a vaccine or antibody test by then, or assurances that medical

facilities won't be overwhelmed, schools should prepare for the possibility that gatherings will still be limited.
The most drastic scenario would be for districts to continue distance learning with students staying at home.
Because schools already rolled out distance learning this spring, by fall they should have the wrinkles ironed out and know where it's working and where it's not, and what more they need as far as training, technology and resources if it's to continue on a grander scale.
A less drastic scenario, if health officials deemed it safe, would be allowing smaller groups of students to enter schools, he said.
Schools might have to separate students into smaller groups who would be kept isolated from one another, he said. Student groups could report to the school building on different days — for instance, one group attends classes on Monday and Tuesday, the other on Thursday and Friday, he said.
Blomstedt said it's possible that delivering lessons via television could play a bigger role. Already the state teachers union, Nebraska State Education Association, is providing televised lessons through its Teacher TV.
Perhaps, he said, those TV lessons could be scaled up, and classroom teachers could take on more of a tutoring role, he said.
Students could even attend three weeks in class followed by three weeks of remote learning, all aimed at avoiding spread, he said.
Blomstedt's outlook tends toward the cautious side — as it has been since the start of the crisis. But he points to the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 for a history lesson. The flu subsided but rebounded with a second deadly wave.
At the time, he said, there were waves of shutdowns.
Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has spoken optimistically about the possibility of schools reopening in the fall.
But he has also suggested that things wouldn't be completely normal.
During a White House briefing on April 7, Fauci said he couldn't predict accurately what the situation would look like but said he expected that by fall "we will have this under control enough that it certainly will not be the way it is now, where people are shutting schools."
Medical officials, however, would still have to identify, isolate and contact-trace people with the disease, he said.
With an antibody test, officials would know more about the actual penetration of the infection in society, he said. Knowing how many people have been infected, who's protected and who's vulnerable would help inform decisions on how close to normal things can return, Fauci said.
"The bottom line is: No absolute prediction, but I think we're going to be in good shape," he said.
Blomstedt said it's important that schools complete this school year and provide kids with learning opportunities in the summer.
Millard Public Schools Superintendent Jim Sutfin told his board this week that district leaders are discussing ideas for fall, including the possibility of full remote learning and smaller groups in school.
"Without immunizations, we're going to be in a tough spot for a long time," Sutfin said.
OPS has a team working on plans, according to Jeremy Maskel, communication director.
Fall is too far out to talk specifics right now, Maskel said.
"Much of that will be determined in coordination with health officials and the Nebraska Department of Education," he said. "We have already gathered feedback to evolve and grow our distance

engagement efforts this spring and will continue to do so heading into fall."
He said the district should decide soon on how to handle summer school.
Lincoln Public Schools Communication Director Mindy Burbach said district leaders have begun initial discussions.
"Without further guidance on timing and social gathering limits, it is difficult to make firm plans in regards to next school year," Burbach said.
For now, the district's focus remains on providing meaningful learning for students and finishing the current school year as strong as possible, she said.
Officials will examine the effectiveness of current remote learning and look for ways to improve it, she said.
Lincoln is considering potential changes for summer school, she said.
By Joe Dejka

OWH: Eppley Airfield to get $32.8 million in federal grants in light of steep drop in air travel

Eppley Airfield in Omaha will receive $32.8 million in federal grant money as it deals with a steep drop in air travel amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
Seventy-one Nebraska airports will get a total of nearly $65 million in grants from the Federal Aviation Administration.
The funding is part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act Airport Grant Program.
Steve McCoy, director of air service and business development for the Omaha Airport Authority, said the funds will be used to help cover debt payments, as well as costs of runway and terminal maintenance and airport operations.
"Right now our continued focus is to keep the airport open and available for customers," McCoy said. "When the stimulus funds start to come in, it will start to provide stability for the longer-term impacts of COVID-19."
McCoy said Eppley typically sees 6,900 departures a day in April; that number has fallen to 263 a day amid the outbreak. He said similar decreases are being seen at airports across the country.
Dave Roth, executive director of the Omaha Airport Authority, said: "We were pleased to see the quick action taken by Congress, including the Nebraska delegation, to get these emergency funds approved for airports like Eppley Airfield."
Airports can use the funds for capital expenditures, operating expenses and airport debt payments.
The top-funded Nebraska airports:

- Eppley Airfield, Omaha: $32,821,258
- Kearney Regional Airport, Kearney: $16,874,151
- Lincoln Airport, Lincoln: $5,612,944
- North Platte Regional Airport, Lee Bird Field, North Platte: $3,859,446
- Central Nebraska Regional Airport, Grand Island: $2,666,378

By Natalie Saenz

LJS: Local businesses help Nebraska State Patrol with mask problem

Nebraska State Patrol officers now can cut down on their use of N95 masks, thanks to a new adapter for their gas masks that was designed and made by two Lincoln companies.

IntoMetal and Kawasaki partnered with NSP to create and donate adapters for reusable filters that can be affixed to the department's existing gas masks, allowing troopers and investigators to use them instead of N95 masks.
Patrol Col. John Bolduc said use of the adapters will save countless pieces of personal protective equipment for medical professionals.
The patrol already had filters for older versions of its gas masks, but those filters didn't fit the masks troopers currently use. The patrol looked to other suppliers for new filters until eventually reaching out to Kawasaki.
Kawasaki created a design for an adapter that attaches the existing filters to the newer masks.
Patrol spokesman Cody Thomas said the design saves resources and taxpayer money.
Kawasaki had stopped making the adapters, focusing its attention on making other products, so IntoMetal, a Lincoln fabrication company, has been making them with a 3D printer.
Garrett Humston, a manufacturing engineer at IntoMetal, said it regularly supplies parts to Kawasaki. Making the adapters, he said, has been a nice change of pace.
Each adapter takes about 1 1/2 hours to create, Humston said, and the company has made about 35 so far. He said the first units IntoMetal made were ready to be tested by the state patrol the following day.
Humston is proud to be able to help his community and state in a time of need, and believes all businesses should do what they can to support local law enforcement.
"I think it's good that the company can help the community recover, because that will help small businesses," he said.
Thomas said NSP is thankful to have the support of local businesses.
"It's these local partnerships with the Nebraska State Patrol that we think are gonna make the difference," he said.
The gas masks will only be used by officers directly exposed to crime scenes and correctional facilities, Thomas said, adding that no NSP employee has been diagnosed with COVID-19.
By Nick McConnell

AP: Nebraska tax collections up in March despite virus shutdowns

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska state government had better-than-expected tax collections in March despite a surge in unemployment and widespread hardship caused by the new coronavirus, according to a report released Wednesday.
The Nebraska Department of Revenue reported net tax collections of $380 million, which is about 12% higher than the projected forecast of $339 million.
The department said net individual and corporate income taxes, net sales-and-use taxes and net miscellaneous taxes were all higher than projected in March.
Net tax collections are also higher than expected in the current fiscal year, which ends June 30. The state has received $3.656 billion so far, up nearly 9% from the certified forecast of $3.359 billion.
Department of Revenue spokeswoman Lydia Brasch said the March numbers “are indicative of the state economy pre-COVID-19,” and next month’s report will likely show a different picture.
“Those numbers will certainly change as a result of what’s happened across the state,” Brasch said.
Members of the Nebraska Economic Forecasting Advisory Board voiced concerns about the virus’ impact on the state at their last meeting in February. The board’s estimates help determine how much tax revenue state lawmakers and the governor have at their disposal.

AP: Judge cancels permit for Keystone XL oil pipeline

BILLINGS, Mont. — A U.S. judge canceled a key permit Wednesday for the Keystone XL oil pipeline that's expected to stretch from Canada to Nebraska, another setback for the disputed project that got underway less than two weeks ago following years of delays.

Judge Brian Morris said the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers failed to adequately consider the pipeline's effect on endangered species such as pallid sturgeon, a massive dinosaur-like fish.

The ruling, however, does not shut down work that has begun at the U.S.-Canada border crossing in Montana, according to attorneys in the case. Pipeline sponsor TC Energy will need the permit for future construction across hundreds of rivers and streams along Keystone's 1,200-mile route.

A spokesman said TC Energy was reviewing the ruling.

"We remain committed to building this important energy infrastructure project," spokesman Terry Cunha said.

Officials with the Army Corps of Engineers did not have an immediate response to the ruling.

Morris is holding a court hearing Thursday on two other lawsuits against the $8 billion pipeline. American Indian tribes and environmental groups want him to halt the construction at the border while a lawsuit challenging President Donald Trump's approval of the pipeline last year works its way through the courts.

The pipeline was proposed in 2008 and would carry up to 830,000 barrels of oil daily to Nebraska, where it would be transferred to another TC Energy pipeline for shipment to refineries and export terminals on the Gulf of Mexico.

It was rejected twice under the Obama administration because of concerns that it could worsen climate change, then Trump revived it.

TC Energy's surprise March 31 announcement that it intended to start construction amid a global economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic came after the provincial government in Alberta invested $1.1 billion to jump-start the work.

As many as 11 construction camps, some housing up to 1,000 people, were initially planned for the project, although TC Energy says those are under review amid the pandemic.

By Matthew Brown

OWH Editorial: Outlet mall's premature reopening threatens public health

Sound, science-based health directives have enabled Nebraska to avoid the scale of terrible coronavirus harm that has struck other states. April, public health experts emphasize, is the period of most severe threat, with a likely peak in COVID-19 cases and deaths. So it's vital that Nebraska stay the course in pursuing responsible public health approaches. That certainly should rule out ad hoc decisions by mall owners to undertake self-described "case studies" by reopening during this pandemic.

Yet, the owner of Nebraska Crossing Outlets has announced plans to do exactly that, with a "soft opening" on April 24. That would be only 15 days into the proclamation by Gov. Pete Ricketts for Nebraskans to stay home for 21 days (through April 30), to reduce the potential for increased virus exposure. The mall will have a "formal grand opening" for its more than 80 stores and restaurants sometime in May, potentially as early as May 1, according to owner Rod Yates.

Laura Redoutey, president of the Nebraska Hospital Association, responded to the news by issuing a

much-needed warning: “This move is in direct contradiction with public health guidelines and poses serious risks to the health of all Nebraskans. Quite simply, it’s irresponsible for a non-essential retailer to open its doors to the public in the middle of a pandemic.”

Redoutey, writing on behalf of Nebraska’s 93 hospitals, noted that Nebraska has made progress in “flattening the curve” by following social distancing, working from home and other needed practices. Such efforts, she rightly says, “need to continue until we see clear evidence that the risk of COVID-19 infections have been significantly reduced and adequate testing is in place.”

The health directives issued by Ricketts in recent weeks have provided a sound, coordinated — and effective — approach to this health crisis. It was disappointing, then, when Ricketts on Tuesday refused to describe the planned mall reopening as the public health threat it is. Ricketts’ passivity undercuts his own health directives, creates needless uncertainty and encourages the undertaking of similar reckless “case studies” by other private-sector entities.

The governor has communicated well through this crisis, and he must continue to provide Nebraskans with clarity. Ricketts should vigorously enforce his health directives, and the mall owner should jettison his plans. It’s crucial that public health considerations guide the actions by government and the private sector. Lives truly are at risk.

OWH: Reopening raises big concerns

Kudos to Gov. Ricketts and Mayor Stothert for the majority of their decisions and the manner in which they have handled the COVID-19 virus in Nebraska and Omaha these past few weeks. They have helped to keep us one of the least affected states.

Now the apparent nonchalance Gov. Ricketts is showing toward the “possibly first in the country” opening of an outlet mall, Nebraska Crossing, is deeply concerning.

Where is the widespread testing availability in Nebraska recommended by the scientists and heath care specialists before openings begin? Why is Nebraska’s first announced opening one of the least essential businesses in the state?

Also concerning is the location of the outlet mall in a prime location to widely spread the virus. It may well place in danger all state residents who have been so diligent in staying home and distancing in order to contain the virus.

Let’s discourage this opening until health officials’ recommendations have been met in Nebraska!

Karen K. Burmood, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 4/16: Postal Service needs action to be saved

The United States Postal Service has been on the ropes for a while, struggling with financial crises. The drop-off of business amid the coronavirus pandemic could be a fatal blow. That’s why quick action is necessary.

First, a little civics lesson: The postal service was authorized in the Constitution and established as an agency within the executive branch of the federal government under President George Washington. While it operates as an independent business, it does so with the mandate to offer service at a uniform price and quality to all regardless of geography. That means it has to cost the same to mail a letter from Cheyenne to Chadron as it does from Chicago to Shreveport. You can see one problem.

Email and the internet contributed to the postal service’s woes, decreasing the volume of business. At the same time, the post office, with its mission to serve everyone everywhere, is frequently used

by other couriers to get packages on the last legs of their journey to expensive-to-reach rural areas.
Then in 2006 came the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, which forced the service to pay between $5.4 billion and $5.8 billion annually through 2016 to get out in front of expected payments for its retiree health benefits fund.
The recession in 2008 was another body blow. And now, a pandemic.
President Trump, according to a Washington Post report, threatened to veto the $2 trillion coronavirus aid package if it contained any bailout money for a postal service he's been interested in privatizing. The final legislation contained $10 billion in the form of a loan.
The loan – not a handout – might solve an immediate problem. But as long as the service is forced to pre-fund its retiree health benefits five decades out, its biggest headache isn't going away.
To that end, the U.S. House of Representatives has passed the USPS Fairness Act, which repeals the requirement that it prepay for future retirement benefits. Recognizing the importance of the postal service to rural areas, Nebraska Reps. Jeff Fortenberry, Don Bacon and Adrian Smith all supported the measure.
An identical bill awaits action in the Senate. It has co-sponsors from both parties, and we urge Sens. Deb Fischer and Ben Sasse to support the bill.
Privatization isn't the answer. It would only hurt rural America, where service would be more expensive or less dependable as the business model evolved to something with a bigger profit margin.
The Postal Service has already made deep cuts and may need more. It will have to innovate to stay relevant and profitable. But it doesn't have to be a cash cow. It just needs to be solvent … and to serve all parts of this nation.

LJS Local View: Speed up Medicaid expansion

In November of 2018, a large majority of Nebraska voters approved Initiative 427, which committed the state to implementing Medicaid expansion. We wanted that because this state would get back about $600 million of our own money from the federal government.
That money would be used to help 90,000 Nebraskans who do not have medical coverage. That money would be paid to doctors and to medical facilities throughout Nebraska – and help keep our rural health clinics open.
Those 90,000 people are mostly people who work at one or two or three jobs at low wages to keep their families clothed and fed. Of those people, 21% – more than two out of every 10 – work in the food industry. They grow our food, prepare our food, put the food on store shelves and serve our food.
Some of them might be freeloaders. Some. The vast majority of the 90,000 are working in industries critical to our economy. But, still, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services has worked incredibly hard to make sure that those ne'er-do-wells don't get a free ride.
In fact, DHHS was so concerned that they proposed to put an incredible number of very clever and very complicated hoops into the process of applying for medical help under Medicaid expansion.
To implement these hoops, DHHS applied to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for a waiver to the Medicaid expansion program. Under the waiver, applicants would need to prove that they participate in wellness programs, take personal responsibility and are active in community engagement. Makes sense, right? We would rather see them not get medical care than take advantage of the tax dollars we have already paid to federal government.

Another wrinkle. Because of the coronavirus emergency, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has had to delay consideration of Nebraska's Medicaid Expansion waiver. So implementation is delayed again.

Medicaid expansion could have started two years before the complex proposed system will be put in place this October. It's been delayed in the quest to deny health care to cheaters.

Remember that 21% of these people work in the food industry. Those people are not getting medical care during this coronavirus crisis. Take a look at your smiling son or daughter as they bite into that pizza, and think that the person who made it may not have the medical coverage or funds to have a physical examination or to get care outside of an emergency room.

DHHS acted in bad faith in responding to our vote. They have endangered all of our lives to pursue what they feel is a righteous cause. It is not better for people to die than to cheat.

OK. I may be overly dramatic. But I'm scared.

I'm 73 years old. I'm in a group that has a high chance of dying from COVID-19 if I contract it. But I don't want anyone to suffer from this disease. I don't want any Nebraskan to be denied the benefit of medical care. And most of all, I don't want my friends and neighbors to suffer because someone providing food can't get medical care.

Governor Ricketts, I commend you for a masterful job in your calm and thoughtful approach as you steer this state through the current crisis. Your demeanor is excellent. And you seem to be marshaling appropriate action.

But your administration has failed miserably in hearing and acting upon the voice of the people. Please implement Initiative 427 by rescinding the proposed waiver and establishing expansion now. Do this not only for the 90,000 hardworking Nebraskans who are denied coverage, but also to help keep clinics open throughout rural Nebraska, and to protect all of us who are now dependent upon people without medical coverage.

Arthur I. Zygielbaum is on the board of directors for Nebraska Appleseed and is an emeritus associate research professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's School of Natural Resources. He lives in Lincoln. This column represents his personal views.

LJS: State senators urge reopening Affordable Care Act enrollment

A dozen state senators have written members of Nebraska's congressional delegation asking them to work with the Trump administration to reopen the Affordable Care Act enrollment period now to help ensure that all Nebraskans have access to health insurance in the midst of the ongoing coronavirus crisis.

"Nebraskans need immediate help," they wrote.

"We are facing a record surge in unemployment," they noted, and reopening the marketplace "would make it easier for people who have recently lost jobs or who had already been uninsured to obtain health insurance.

"The Trump administration has established such special enrollment periods in the past, typically in the wake of natural disasters," they said.

Signing the letter, initiated by Sen. Kate Bolz of Lincoln, were 10 Democratic members of the Legislature and two Republican members, Sens. John McCollister and Robert Hilkemann, both of Omaha.

Sens. Matt Hansen, Anna Wishart and Patty Pansing Brooks, all of Lincoln, signed the request along with Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue, Sen. Dan Quick of Grand Island and Sens. Megan Hunt, Sara

Howard, Steve Lathrop and Rick Kolowski, all of Omaha.
By Don Walton

AP: More pressure to track nursing home deaths; help for poorer nations; jitters in Las Vegas

Federal health officials are coming under increasing pressure to start publicly tracking coronavirus infections and deaths in nursing homes amid criticism they have not been transparent enough in responding to outbreaks there.
COVID-19 has claimed thousands of lives in U.S. nursing homes.
Experts say the lack of tracking and transparency has been a major blind spot, and that publicizing outbreaks as they happen could not only alert communities and anguished relatives but also help officials see where to focus testing and safety measures.
"This is basic public health — you track this, you study it, and you learn from it," said David Grabowski, who specializes in health care policy at Harvard Medical School.
Such an action by the agencies that oversee the nation's 15,000 nursing homes is seen as long overdue, coming more than a month after a nursing home in Washington state became the first COVID-19 hot spot in the U.S. with an outbreak that ultimately killed 43 people.
Because the federal government has not been releasing a count, the Associated Press has been keeping its own tally based on media reports and state health departments. The AP's latest count of at least 4,485 deaths is up from about 450 just two weeks ago.
"We recognize there should be more reporting," said Seema Verma, head of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, on Wednesday.
Verma said her agency is working to increase reporting on outbreaks.

WHO PAYMENTS

Nations around the world reacted with alarm to news that President Donald Trump put a halt to American payments to the World Health Organization. He said WHO didn't do enough to stop the virus and is too lenient with China. Health experts warned the move could jeopardize global efforts to stop the pandemic.
Philanthropists Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg joined European and African leaders and health experts who lined up behind the WHO or said the U.S. shouldn't cut off funding at such a critical time.
The exact fallout from a halt in U.S. funding was far from clear.
"Trump has a mercurial reputation. So he sort of promises death and destruction and then it doesn't necessarily happen," said Gian Luca Burci, a former legal counsel for WHO who now teaches at Geneva's Graduate Institute. "I think it will become more clear in the next few weeks."

POORER COUNTRIES

The world's richest countries agreed Wednesday to freeze poor nations' debt obligations, shortly after nearly 20 European and African leaders made a joint appeal for a massive international effort to boost Africa's coronavirus response, saying that "only a global victory that fully includes Africa can bring this pandemic to an end."
Finance ministers of the G-20 group of major economies, which includes the U.S., China, India and others, said they will immediately put on hold poor countries' obligations to service debt they owe.
"This is a powerful, fast-acting initiative that will do much to safeguard the lives and livelihoods of millions of the most vulnerable people," said World Bank Group President David Malpass and IMF

Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva in a statement.
Efforts to slow the spread of the virus may be choking Africa's already-vulnerable food supply. Lockdowns in 33 of Africa's 54 countries have blocked farmers from getting food to markets. Many informal markets where millions buy their food are shut.
'TOTAL INSANITY' Las Vegas is withering with tourists staying home and conventions and businesses closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, according to the city's mayor .
"This shutdown has become one of total insanity," Mayor Carolyn Goodman said the day after Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak declared he was nowhere near reopening parts of the state's idled economy.
"For heaven's sake," Goodman said, "being closed is killing us already, and killing Las Vegas, our industry, our convention and tourism business that we have all worked so hard to build. The longer we wait to do this, the more impossible it will become to recover."
State health officials reported Wednesday that more than 3,200 people have been diagnosed with the virus, and 131 have died.
MILITARY ADJUSTING
The U.S. military is trying to maintain a defensive crouch, sustain troops' health and protect the nation during difficult times.
Military leaders are suggesting that this summer may be the best-case scenario of tiptoeing toward a return to normal activities.
"We are going to need to change and adapt, because even over the coming months the virus isn't going to go away. We're going to have to be able to operate in a COVID environment," Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist said recently.

AP: S.D. man dies; plant is virus hot spot

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The number of people testing positive for the coronavirus in South Dakota has surpassed 1,100, and more than half of those cases have some connection to the Smithfield Foods pork processing plant in Sioux Falls.
Health officials said Wednesday that 180 more people tested positive for COVID-19 in the last day, bringing the statewide total to 1,168 cases. A total of 934 cases were in Minnehaha County, the location of the Smithfield Foods plant.
The plant is one of the largest known clusters of COVID-19 cases in the country. As of Wednesday, 644 people with connections to the plant were infected.
That number includes 518 employees, including one who died on Tuesday.
Agustin Rodriguez's pastor confirmed his death to the Associated Press. It appeared Rodriguez's death was not included in state figures released Wednesday: The state has said the number of deaths has held steady at six since April 7.
Despite the growing number of cases, Gov. Kristi Noem said Wednesday that the state's efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus are working. Sioux Falls is expected to see its number of cases peak in mid-May, while the rest of the state is expected to see a peak in mid-June.
"We are going to continue to recommend all of our mitigation efforts," she said. "What you are doing at home by staying at home and making sure you are practicing social distancing is making a difference."
Noem said she has been talking with Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and officials from the Smithfield Foods plant to work on a plan for getting it up and running again. Officials from the U.S.

Centers for Disease Control are in Sioux Falls and plan to walk through the plant Thursday. She said officials recognize the plant's importance in the nation's food supply, and getting it up and running is a "national security issue."
Meanwhile, absent a statewide stay-at-home order, the mayor of Sioux Falls is pursuing a city-wide shelter-in-place ordinance to try to curb the outbreak in his city.
For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms. Older adults and people with existing health problems are among those particularly susceptible to severe illness, including pneumonia.

Tribune News Service: Experts: Virus, social distancing could continue into 2022

Coronavirus infections will rebound and threaten to overwhelm hospitals when current social distancing measures are lifted, so prolonged or periodic restrictions may be needed for two more years, according to mathematical modeling by Harvard University's Chan School of Public Health.
The study, published this week in the journal Science, came as governors were conferring on when and how to safely lift stay-at-home orders and reopen their states' economies. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has cited a University of Washington model that predicts the U.S. outbreak will taper off at the end of May, enabling a return to normalcy.
"Even in the event of apparent elimination," the Harvard researchers wrote, coronavirus "surveillance should be maintained, since a resurgence in contagion could be possible as late as 2024."
Senior author Marc Lipsitch added during a teleconference: "Predicting an end to the pandemic in the summer ... is not consistent with what we know."
Lipsitch and his coauthors stressed that no one knows the answers to vitally important questions about natural protection: Are people who recover from COVID-19 fully immune to the virus, and for how long? Blood tests that could provide insights by detecting disease-fighting antibodies are just now coming on the market — but many are proving to be unreliable.
Given the uncertainties, the researchers modeled various estimates of immunity, of how much infections wane in hot months, and of social distancing, to predict the future spread of coronavirus.
Under all simulations — including one-time social isolation and intermittent isolation — infections surged when the restrictions were lifted. The worst-case scenario was early, stringent distancing followed by no controls. That unleashed an especially large wave of disease in the winter, a pattern seen with the 1918 flu pandemic that infected a quarter of the world's population and killed as many as 100 million people.
The model also showed the consequences of too much isolation. A 20-week period of social and economic shutdown was so effective at reducing virus transmission "that virtually no population immunity was built," which in turn intensified the next peak in the roller coaster of disease and death.
A number of public health efforts could improve the outlook, the researchers wrote. These include more diagnostic testing and rigorous contact tracing, expanded critical-care capacity in hospitals, accurate blood antibody testing, effective treatments for COVID-19, and the greatest hope — a vaccine against the virus.
"We do not take a position on the advisability of these scenarios given the economic burden that sustained distancing may pose," the researchers concluded, "but we note the potentially catastrophic burden on the health-care system that is predicted if distancing is poorly effective

and/or not sustained for long enough."
By Marie McCullough

AP: 5.2 million more seek unemployment aid — bringing four-week total to 22 million

WASHINGTON (AP) — The wave of layoffs that has engulfed the U.S. economy since the coronavirus struck forced 5.2 million more people to seek unemployment benefits last week, the government reported Thursday.

Roughly 22 million have now sought jobless benefits in the past month — easily the worst stretch of U.S. job losses on record. It means that roughly one in seven workers have lost their jobs in that time.

The grim figures point to an economy that is tumbling into what appears to be a calamitous recession, the worst in decades. The nation's output could shrink by roughly 10.5% before it starts to rebound, according to Ryan Sweet, an economist at Moody's Analytics. That would be more than double the contraction that occurred during the 2008-2009 recession, which was the worst downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

All businesses deemed nonessential have been closed in nearly every state. Deep job losses have been inflicted across nearly every industry. Some economists say the unemployment rate could reach as high as 20% in April, which would be the highest rate since the Great Depression of the 1930s. By comparison, unemployment never topped 10% during the Great Recession.

Layoffs are spreading beyond service industries like hotels, bars and restaurants, which absorbed the brunt of the initial job cuts, into white collar professional occupations, including software programmers, construction workers and sales people.

Up to 50 million jobs are vulnerable to coronavirus-related layoffs, economists say — about one-third of all positions in the United States. That figure is based on a calculation of jobs that are deemed non-essential by state and federal governments and that cannot be done from home.

It's unlikely that all those workers will be laid off or file for unemployment benefits. But it suggests the extraordinary magnitude of unemployment that could result from the pandemic.

"This crisis combines the scale of a national economic downturn with the pace of a natural disaster," said Daniel Zhao, senior economist at Glassdoor. "And that's really unprecedented in American economic history."

All told, nearly 12 million people are now receiving unemployment checks, essentially matching the peak reached in January 2010, shortly after the Great Recession officially ended. That figure is less than the number of applicants in part because it lags behind the number of first-time jobless claims figure by a week. And many people who apply for unemployment aid are turned down and don't actually receive checks.

Retailers and other service companies keep cutting jobs. The electronics chain Best Buy said this week that it will furlough 51,000 of its hourly employees, including nearly all its part-time workers. Royal Caribbean Cruises will cut one-quarter of its 5,000 corporate employees.

But now, job losses are spreading well beyond occupations involving restaurants, retail, travel and entertainment, which were hit first and hardest. The software company Toast, which works with the restaurant industry, last week cut half its workforce — or 1,300 people — citing a dizzying drop in restaurant sales. Yelp, the customer review site, cut 1,000 jobs. Groupon, the online discount company, shed 2,800.

Some law firms have been forced to reduce their staffs. One victim was Fern Weinbaum, 68, who

was furloughed last month from her job as a legal secretary at a small law firm in Manhattan. Weinbaum still hasn't received her unemployment benefits, which she is counting on to help pay her monthly rent of $1,100.
"I am very anxious, I need the money," she said. "It's very frustrating."
Employee discussions of layoffs on Zhao's website have jumped 47% among information technology firms and 64% in finance, he said. Such discussions have nearly doubled among workers in health care. That's no longer surprising: Many doctors' offices and other health providers have cut back on nonessential procedures, and some are cutting staff.
Some state unemployment agencies, swamped by applications, are still working through backlogs, suggesting that the claims figures will likely remain high in the coming weeks.
Connecticut's labor department said this week that it had processed roughly half the nearly 350,000 applications for jobless benefits it had received in the past month. That's usually the amount it typically receives in two years.
In most states, self-employed, freelance and gig workers aren't yet able to file applications for unemployment aid under new rules enacted by the federal government's $2.2 trillion economic relief package. That legislation extended eligibility for aid to those categories of workers for the first time. But most states have to establish new systems to handle their jobless claims.
That's become a problem for people like Celia Rocha, 44, who lost what she called her "dream job" as a studio assistant to an artist in Los Angeles after California ordered all non-essential businesses to close last month. Rocha, who had worked as a contractor for three years, said she applied for benefits but was inexplicably turned down. When she has called the state's phone line to ask questions, she has received only a recording directing her to the website.
"It's really frustrating that you can't talk to someone and have your questions answered," Rocha said. "There's no information about when we can apply for this" on the state's website.
On Wednesday, California said it was intending to have a website for the self-employed and contractors active by Monday.
By Christopher Rugaber

Wednesday, April 15, 2020

TV and Radio
KSNB: A new approach is required to defeat COVID-19, Senator Halloran says
WNAX: Protecting Meat Plant Workers
NTV: National Guard starts preparing UNK dorms for quarantine
NET: Restaurants To Sell Groceries; Ricketts Reacts To Trump Claim Of Authority
NCN: Nebraska Restaurants Could Sell Retail From Food, Paper Product Supply Chain
10/11: Nebraska Crossing plans 'soft re-opening' next weekend
NET: Report: Nebraska Corrections Not Providing Adequate Mental Health Services
KETV: 'We're not holding back': Nebraska Public Health Lab says supply can't meet demand for COVID-19 testing

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OWH: Douglas County man among 4 new statewide COVID-19 deaths; G.I. area reports 40 new cases
Scottsbluff SH: National Guard testing confirms one positive test in Scotts Bluff County
OWH: Owner of Nebraska Crossing Outlets plans to reopen mall this month amid pandemic
LJS: Gretna outlet mall to reopen next week
AP: Nebraska mall plans to reopen despite climbing virus cases
KLKN: Gretna outlet mall to reopen April 24
NY Post: Nebraska mall plans to reopen despite rise in coronavirus cases
OWH: Soon you could pick up some groceries — maybe even some toilet paper! — with your takeout
AP: Nebraska to let restaurants sell bread, milk, toilet paper
OWH: Grace: What's happening behind closed doors? Domestic violence calls spike on Easter
NTV: Who has the power to 're-open' the country?

Coronavirus
LJS: COVID-19 claims two more residents of Adams assisted-living center
GII: Latest total: 251 COVID-19 cases in three-county area
NET: As Grand Island Cases Increase, Health Officials Expand Capacity And Patient Transfer Options
NET: UNMC Expert: Some Social Distancing Can Be Relaxed After Peak
AP: US backs contentious meat-plant changes with supply at risk

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LJS: Abortion survey shows some Nebraska candidates would not make exception to save mother's life
OWH: NU system anticipates uncertainty, $50 million-plus shortfall from coronavirus pandemic
LJS: NU anticipates $50 million hit from economic fallout of coronavirus

State, Local and Regional
LJS: Bryan, CHI Health seeing most non-COVID-19 patients via telehealth
AP: 2 largest US rivers top new listing of endangered waterways

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OWH Editorial: Food Bank for the Heartland is a key force against hunger in the Midlands
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15. Concern over outlets reopening
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18. Farewell to an American legend

LJS Editorial, 4/15: How we come out of this pandemic is the real challenge

LJS Local View: A tale of two crises

LJS Letters

6. Case workers deserve thanks
7. Trump appointee mishandled incident
8. Ag workers deserve respect
9. Word of the week is 'aspirational'
10. Cost of inaction will be clear

Sioux City Journal: LETTER: 'What could possibly be the reason ...?'

National/Federal

AP: States developing plans to ease lockdowns

OWH: Iowa sees highest daily coronavirus count yet as outbreak spreads at Tyson pork plant

OWH: Grassroots group pulls the plug on ballot initiative seeking 35% reduction in property taxes

LINCOLN — The group behind an initiative petition seeking to cut property taxes by 35% called it quits Monday, citing an inability to collect signatures during the coronavirus outbreak.

A key player with the TRUE Nebraskans group, State Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard, said Tuesday that he didn't have the "intestinal fortitude" to ask volunteers to risk getting the virus to obtain signatures from voters who will be reluctant to be approached.

"People aren't going to respond to someone knocking on their door or stopping them on the street," Erdman said.

But officials with other initiative petition drives, including those to legalize medical cannabis and casino gambling, still held out hope of meeting a July 2 deadline to submit enough signatures to qualify for the November ballot. All have suspended collection efforts for the time being.

"Not all hope is lost yet, but there's a lot of uncertainty," said State Sen. Anna Wishart of Lincoln, one of the co-sponsors of Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana.

Initiative petition groups need to gather more than 120,000 signatures of registered voters by July 2 to qualify their proposals for the Nov. 10 general election ballot.

At least one state, Michigan, is allowing "e-signatures" to be gathered on line for a petition drive there. But a spokeswoman with the Nebraska Secretary of State's Office said Tuesday that Nebraska law doesn't allow that, nor would it allow an extension of the signature deadline.

In the case of the property tax effort, some observers had expressed doubts that TRUE Nebraskans could reach that goal, given that it hadn't hired professional petition circulators to gather signatures.

Erdman said he didn't know how many signatures the group had collected but said that the organization had to cancel 75 signature-collecting events when social distancing measures went into effect a month ago. The group initially suspended operations temporarily on March 19. But President Donald Trump's decision to extend federal guidelines for an additional 30 days "essentially shut down our state," the group wrote in a post on the TRUE Nebraskans website.

"With public gatherings and even personal contact limited, there is no reasonable expectation that we can finish the task, without needless risk to the health and safety of our circulator network and to Nebraskans, in general," said the post.

The future of a petition drive aimed at creating an independent redistricting commission, which wasn't launched until last month, also appears in jeopardy.

Former State Sen. DiAnna Schimek of Lincoln said the group had not yet begun collecting signatures

when the pandemic hit. Supporters, she said, were not ready to give up but were looking at their options.
Leaders of three other petition drives expressed confidence that they can still make the ballot if signature collecting can resume by June.
Lance Morgan of Ho-Chunk Inc. and Keep the Money in Nebraska said the group needs "a couple of solid weeks" to gather sufficient signatures for its package of proposals, which would allow casino games at Thoroughbred racetracks.
That drive, which began last year, is in good shape, Morgan said.
Wishart, of Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana, said the group is "pretty confident" about qualifying for the ballot, as long as the group has a month to gather signatures before the July deadline.
She said the group has been preparing for a "socially distant" type of signature gathering, such as providing signers with their own pens, outfitting circulators with gloves, masks, hand sanitizers and, possibly, a plastic barrier.
Aubrey Mancuso of Nebraskans for Responsible Lending also said things were looking good for hitting the signature target on a petition to regulate payday lenders.
"We're not worried at this point," she said.
The TRUE ("Tax Relief Unites Everyone") Nebraskans drive was launched 11 months ago after the Nebraska Legislature failed to pass a bill to provide substantial property tax relief.
The group's initiative, if it had been adopted, would have given all property owners a state income tax credit equal to 35% of their annual property tax bill. Backers had included Hal Daub, a former Omaha mayor and congressman, as well as at least six state senators, who maintained that the initiative would have forced the Legislature to do something about the state's traditionally high property taxes.
Others, including Gov. Pete Ricketts, had condemned the "35% Solution," saying would have caused a crisis in funding of state universities, K-12 schools and other state priorities.
By Paul Hammel and Martha Stoddard

AP: Nebraska property tax activists suspend ballot campaign

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Activists who pushed for a statewide ballot measure to lower property taxes in Nebraska have suspended their campaign due to the coronavirus, organizers said Monday.
The group TRUE Nebraskans posted the announcement on its website. Organizers said the state's social-distancing restrictions have made it too difficult to collect enough signatures by the July 2 submission deadline.
The group pulled its circulators off the streets on March 19. If they had gathered enough signatures, their proposal would have appeared on the November general election ballot.
The proposal would have given a state-funded rebate to Nebraska taxpayers equal to 35% of the taxable value of their property. Some prominent conservatives backed the proposal, but critics, including Gov. Pete Ricketts, argued that it would lead to major cuts to services or tax increases elsewhere.
"With public gatherings and even personal contact limited, there is no reasonable expectation that we can finish the task without needless risk to the health and safety of our circulator network and to Nebraskans in general," the group said in a statement on its website.
Two other ballot campaigns to legalize casino gambling and medical marijuana have said they're confident they'll have enough signatures to qualify for the November ballot.

WJAG: Thousands of Madison County voters requesting mail-in ballots

MADISON - It's been strongly encouraged by Secretary of State Bob Evnen and Governor Pete Ricketts for registered voters to request a mail-in ballot for this year's primary election.
During the Madison County Board of Commissioners meeting Tuesday County Clerk Anne Pruss said there are over 20,000 registered voters in the county and over 5,000 of them have requested mail-in ballots.
"We've been able to process those applications within a 24 hour period and then put back in the mail. People should see that turnover pretty quickly."
This is Pruss' first election and she said it's been a big learning curve, but courthouse employees and department heads have helped to make it go easier.
She said they now have a ballot box set up outside the courthouse for people to put their mail-in ballot application in if they don't want to mail them.
The last day to request a mail-in ballot is May 1st. The Primary Election is May 12th.
By Cody Ronnfeldt

LJS: White named juvenile court judge

Elise White was appointed Tuesday by Gov. Pete Ricketts to become a Lancaster County juvenile court judge.
White, 38, founded White Law Office and is an alternate chairperson for the Lancaster County Mental Health Board. Before that, she was a law clerk at Cada, Froscheiser, Cada & Hoffman law firm.
The University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate is a member of three bar associations — Lincoln Bar Association, Nebraska Bar Association and the American Bar Association — and is also a past president of the Nebraska Lawyers Trust Account Foundation.
She has been active as a member of Rotary and St. Paul United Methodist Church, served on the board for the Northeast Family Center and worked with the Cooper YMCA and the Lancaster County Child Advocacy Center.
She will replace Judge Toni Thorson, who retired.

OWH: Ricketts vows to 'do what's best' for Nebraska in making decisions on relaxing restrictions

LINCOLN — Gov. Pete Ricketts promised Tuesday to "do what's best" for Nebraska in relaxing social distancing restrictions, regardless of what President Donald Trump may say.
But, at his daily briefing, the Republican governor sought to emphasize the collaboration between his administration and the federal government on responses to the coronavirus epidemic. He said they have worked together throughout the outbreak.
"There are people out there who are trying to drive a wedge between the president, governors, public health officials," Ricketts said. "Let's not get caught up in that Washington, D.C.-type gotcha politics.
"Let's focus on the task at hand, which is managing the pandemic we have here in the state. That's what my team and I are focused on."

Trump asserted Monday that he is the ultimate decision-maker for determining how and when to lift restrictions aimed at slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

His assertion drew immediate pushback from some governors, including New York's Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, who cited the 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and states' rights. Several GOP lawmakers also criticized Trump's claim.

Trump then called out the Democratic governors in a Tuesday tweet, saying that "Mutiny on the Bounty" was his one of his favorite movies and that "a good old fashioned mutiny every now and then is an invigorating thing to watch, especially when the mutineers need so much from the Captain. Too easy!"

Ricketts steered clear of any criticism of the president, saying his only focus is on keeping coronavirus patients from overwhelming the health care system in Nebraska. He said he expects to reopen the state gradually and does not have any specific plans yet.

On Friday, the governor announced a push for Nebraskans to stay home through the end of April, except for essential errands. He called for people to avoid social gatherings.

In other topics:

State relief fund

Ricketts took no position on a letter sent to congressional leaders by the Platte Institute and similar think tanks in 15 other states.

The letter called for Congress to give states more flexibility in using the $150 billion coronavirus relief fund authorized in federal legislation last month. Nebraska could get $1.25 billion, but the money currently is limited to use in responding to the coronavirus, such as purchasing protective equipment and ventilators.

The Platte Institute letter asked for states to be allowed to use the money to offset tax revenue losses or to provide one-time tax relief that could help revive the economy.

Ricketts said those are questions for Congress to address. He said Nebraska can manage revenue losses within its current state budget.

U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer joined 15 other senators last week in raising another concern about the funds. In a letter, they urged the administration to make more of the money available to local governments. Currently, only entities with 500,000 population can get a share of the relief funds. In Nebraska, the only one to qualify would be Douglas County.

State Sen. John Stinner of Gering, the Appropriations Committee chairman, said more flexibility with the relief money would be very helpful. He said he believes that state and local governments could show how much of their revenue losses were caused by the coronavirus, which would address concerns that some states had budget problems before the outbreak began.

Guard on campus

Troops from the Nebraska National Guard will soon be visible on the University of Nebraska campuses in Omaha, Lincoln and Kearney.

Ricketts said they will be preparing dorm rooms for use by first responders, health care workers and others who need a place to quarantine or convalesce because they can't do that at their own homes.

By Martha Stoddard

LJS: Ricketts says he'll 'do what's best for Nebraska,' even if Trump reopens economy early

Gov. Pete Ricketts said he remains focused on keeping Nebraskans safe and preventing the state's

health care system from being overrun because of the coronavirus rather than the politics of when to reopen the economy.
At an afternoon news briefing Tuesday, Ricketts said Nebraska will continue to work collaboratively with federal and local governments to determine when and how the state will lift restrictions meant to slow the spread of COVID-19.
“There are people out there who are trying to drive a wedge between the president, governors, public health officials,” he said. “Let’s not get caught up in that Washington, D.C.-type ‘gotcha’ politics.”
Ricketts’ statements come a day after President Donald Trump announced, both on Twitter and during a daily White House news briefing, that it was his sole decision when pandemic restrictions would be relaxed and the economy would be allowed to reopen.
The president’s comments inflamed Democrat governors on both coasts, as well as several Republicans in Congress who pointed to the 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which says powers not delegated to the federal government are reserved to the states.
On Tuesday, Trump announced he was "authorizing" governors to conduct "a very powerful reopening of their state at a time and manner" appropriate for their state — an authority they already have.
Ricketts has routinely urged Nebraskans to stay home, work from home whenever possible, avoid social gatherings and shop once a week as part of a campaign to blunt the spread of the coronavirus through April 30.
He has not issued a shelter-at-home mandate as nearly all other states have done, however, saying such a measure was not part of Nebraska’s plan to respond to the global pandemic. Instead, Ricketts has relied on a series of directed health measures, including statewide restrictions similar in nature to rules in other states.
The governor, a Trump ally who has appeared at several White House events, including most recently a black-tie event in February, didn’t criticize the president’s statements as other state and congressional leaders did Monday and Tuesday.
“We work collaboratively with our federal officials,” Ricketts said. “We do that with local governments as well.”
Nebraska plans to ease its restrictions over time in consultation with government leaders, public health experts and others, Ricketts said. There are no specifics on when that might take place, he added.
Should Trump or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention drop the 10-person rule, Ricketts said state officials "will continue to do what's right for Nebraska."
“Right now, we want people to really focus on our ‘Stay Home, Stay Healthy, Stay Connected’ for the next 2½ weeks here as we approach the end of April,” he said.
In other news:

More options for restaurants

Restaurants in Nebraska will now be able to sell food and other supplies not labeled for retail sale after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration temporarily waived regulations preventing them from doing so.
That means restaurants can sell their stock of bulk foods they purchase from distributors and local farmers, said Steve Wellman, director of the state Department of Agriculture, without needing nutrition labels to be included.
Zoe Olson, executive director of the Nebraska Restaurant Association, said Nebraskans can now buy

food products such as cereal, eggs, butter, milk, bread, and fresh produce from restaurants, as well as other household items such as paper towels or toilet paper.
Customers are asked to call ahead before purchasing any items, however.
The move could help several restaurants survive the COVID-19 pandemic, and keep employees on the payroll, Olson said.

Managing central Nebraska cases

Despite an exponential increase in new virus cases in Hall and Adams counties over the last week, Ricketts said the health care systems in Grand Island and Hastings have not been overwhelmed.
"Part of our plan was always to be able to move patients around and take a statewide approach to our health care system," he said, "so that we could leverage where we have capacity in one part of the state if we were coming up against capacity in another part of the state."
CHI St. Francis in Grand Island, part of the CHI Health system with hospitals in Lincoln and Omaha, was able to obtain more ventilators as the need went up last week.
Hall County reported 235 cases by Tuesday evening, and Adams County edged ahead of Lancaster County with 62, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.
Statewide, 901 confirmed cases have been reported.

Dorms, campuses being prepared

The Nebraska National Guard is setting up checkpoints and preparing residence halls at the University of Nebraska's campuses in Lincoln, Omaha and Kearney to house individuals who need a place to quarantine if they have been exposed to the coronavirus.
Dorm rooms are also being readied for health care workers and first responders who need a place to stay while they work on the front lines of the pandemic, Ricketts said.
"You may see National Guard troops in their uniforms walking around getting prepared," he said. "They'll be taking the temperature of anybody who enters those buildings, they'll be helping our guests out with regards to any basic needs our guests have and then, if they need medical help, they'll be connecting them to a medical health professional."
By Chris Dunker

Iowa Starting Line: Nebraska and Iowa Work Closely Together In Pandemic Response

As the coronavirus moves through the country and statewide shutdowns continue into another week, many states are talking about when and how to reopen their societies and economies. Many governors are collaborating on their responses, with Nebraska and Iowa emerging as a close team in the Midwest. That partnership may have implications for how the federal government is viewing responses for the two states.
Other neighboring states around the country have formed joint pacts to determine when they ease restrictions together. When asked at her press conference today which states Gov. Kim Reynolds might want to be a part of for such a collaboration, she ticked off several Western Plains states.
"We've had conversations with the North Dakota governor, South Dakota governor, we've talked to the Wyoming governor, I've talked to Pete Ricketts, Gov. Ricketts, we talk probably at least once a week if not more," Reynolds said. She also mentioned Missouri, and noted Illinois at the end of her comments.
"It just makes a lot of sense to look at it from a regional perspective," she said.
Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Utah and Arkansas are the seven states without statewide stay-at-home orders for their populations (a few have regional orders). All have

Republican governors.
Instead of stay-at-home orders, most of these governors have only issued recommendations for people to stay at home.
Reynolds seems to be working closest with Nebraska's governor, Pete Ricketts, who has talked already about opening up the state, despite an expansion in cases outside of the more densely populated areas of Omaha and Lincoln.
Hall County, which is in the south-central area of the state and encompasses the city of Grand Island, has reported 197 cases — a per capita rate six times the statewide average. Grand Island is also home to a meatpacking plant that serves as the city's biggest employer and has seen rising numbers of cases.
The outbreak at the JBS plant in Grand Island occurred relatively early on in the virus' spread through the state, on April 3. Lessons learned from that outbreak may not have caught on in Nebraska's neighboring states, as both South Dakota and Iowa are grappling with widespread outbreaks of their own at food processing centers.
According to the Grand Island Independent, cases are also popping up in smaller meat packing plants in smaller towns like Hastings and Fremont. Today, the Omaha World-Herald reported an outdoor outlet mall between Lincoln and Omaha announced a "soft" re-opening date of April 24.
Yet both Iowa and Nebraska are seeing a steady rise in cases.
Testing in both states is limited, so it's likely the number of cases is higher than reported. In Iowa, tests have largely been reserved for people in hospitals, adults older than 60 who have symptoms and a chronic medical condition, anyone with symptoms who lives in a congregate setting — like long-term care facility or prison — and people who work on the frontlines of the disease with possible patients.
Last Friday, Donald Trump downplayed the need for widespread testing, specifically using Iowa and Nebraska both as examples because of their smaller populations and low population density.
"If we go to Iowa, if we go to Nebraska … you don't need testing there," Trump said. "You don't have to test every person in the state of Iowa, for example … to be able to say let's open up."
Iowa and Nebraska are also in talks together with other parts of the federal government. Last week, Reynolds and Ricketts both had a call with Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who said he approved of the states' measures despite calling for governors to issue strict stay-at-home instructions.
"If you look at what's going on in this country, I just don't understand why we're not doing that," Fauci said the day before. "We really should be."
After the call, Reynolds and Ricketts both Tweeted about Fauci's comments, and Fauci later that day said as much at one of Trump's press conferences.
Had a productive and positive phone call w/ Dr. Fauci and @GovRicketts today... Dr. Fauci was 100% supportive, saying that IA and NE are "on the same page" with guidance he's providing other states.
.@IAGovernor and I just wrapped a call with Dr. Fauci. We briefed him on our #COVID19 social distancing rules. He supports our plans and says our states are "on the same page" with the direction he's giving.
At the moment, Reynolds is holding off calls to ease restrictions in Iowa. In her press conference, Reynolds said she and her team don't have any dates in mind, but are looking at data to determine when re-opening the state is safe.
"I'm not going to make any projections right now," she said. "We're hoping we can start that process in May but I'll have to see where we're at at the end of the month."

She added that, though she may be talking with other governors, at the end of the day it's an individual decision.
"I can tell you while we'll look at it from a regional perspective and we'll talk about, collectively, the metrics that we're using each individual governor is going to look at their own state's metrics," she said. "While we can take a look at maybe finding some agreement in what those metrics may look like, every governor is going to have to take a look at what's happening in their state and make those decisions based on what they're seeing."
By Nikoel Hytrek

OWH: Douglas County man among 4 new statewide COVID-19 deaths; G.I. area reports 40 new cases

Four more deaths related to the coronavirus were reported in Nebraska on Tuesday, bringing the total who have died to 22.
Total cases in the state reached 901 on Tuesday, driven by a sharp increase in the Grand Island area, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
Two of the deaths were reported in Gage County, one in Douglas County and one in Custer County.
The two Gage County deaths stemmed from a previously reported outbreak at an assisted living facility, according to Public Health Solutions. A woman in her 80s died Thursday. A man in his 70s with multiple underlying health conditions died Tuesday.
In all, three residents of the same facility have now died of complications of COVID-19. A woman in her 90s died on March 31.
Public Health Solutions also announced Tuesday that a female employee of Gold Crest Retirement Center in Adams, Nebraska, has tested positive. The woman, in her 20s, is self-isolating. Gage County has more than two dozen confirmed cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.
The Custer County case involved a man in his 80s with underlying health conditions.
The Douglas County death involved a man in his 60s with underlying health issues, according to the Douglas County Health Department. The county now has seven confirmed deaths tied to the virus.
Statistics released Tuesday reinforce how rapidly the disease is spreading in the Grand Island area.
Reported cases in that area grew by 40 on Tuesday to a total of 251, according the Central District Health Department, which serves Hall, Merrick and Hamilton Counties.
That total includes 235 cases in Hall County, where Grand Island is, 13 cases in Hamilton County and three in Merrick County.
Local public health officials say they don't have the resources they need to get ahead of the virus.
"We continue to be challenged with not having enough tests," the Central District Public Health Department said in a statement posted Monday afternoon on Facebook. "We are doing our best to test those who are high priority."
Health officials say they understand people are anxious about the virus and the inability to get tested. Local officials are working with the state to get additional testing.
Despite the sharp increase in case numbers in the Grand Island area, Gov. Pete Ricketts said the state's plan for slowing the spread of the virus has been effective.
"I would say the plan is working because we have not overwhelmed the health care system in Grand Island," he said.
Four patients, including one transplant patient, were moved from Grand Island to hospitals in Lincoln and Omaha this week.

Additionally, Ricketts said the National Guard would return to Grand Island to help with testing. The team was in Hastings on Tuesday.
As central Nebraska's numbers rise, that part of the state is threatening to eclipse the much more populated Douglas County, where Omaha is located. The tri-county area around Grand Island has a population of 78,400, compared to 571,000 people in Douglas County.
Douglas County saw its reported cases rise by 10 on Tuesday, to a total of 255.
Of the new Douglas County cases, five are men and five are women. They range in age from 27 to 64 years old. Six had contact with a known case, two were community-acquired and two remain under investigation. None of the new cases have required hospitalization.
The Douglas County Health Center reported Tuesday that it has seven new COVID-19 cases. They involve five residents and two employees.
Since March 29, the Health Center has had a total of 32 confirmed cases — 20 long-term care residents and 12 employees. Two of the residents have died. Nine of the residents are isolated in their rooms at the Health Center and are in stable condition. The other nine are hospitalized.
Erin Nelson, administrator of Douglas County Health Center, said she continues to be optimistic the virus is contained to two areas of the Health Center.
Also on Tuesday, Lancaster County, where Lincoln is located, reported one case, bringing the county's total to 57. The latest case is a man in his 30s who is self-isolating.
He is believed to have contracted the virus through community spread. That's been the case with the vast majority, 50, of confirmed COVID-19 illnesses in Lancaster County, according to local officials. Lancaster County has had one death.
By Nancy Gaarder

Scottsbluff SH: National Guard testing confirms one positive test in Scotts Bluff County

Testing from the Nebraska National Guard over the weekend resulted in the announcement of only one new case in the Panhandle.
Region 22 Emergency Manager Tim Newman updated the media and others that 99 people had been tested over two days of testing in Scotts Bluff County last week. Out of those tests, one person, a teenager who worked at a health or longterm care facility, had been found to have tested positive for the coronavirus. Scotts Bluff County Public Health Director said the teen had some mild symptoms prior to the test.
The teen is in isolation and close contacts have been identified and are being quarantined. Some contacts associated with the case have been tested.
The case is an example of the reasons health care workers and first responders were tested — to identify those persons who might be positive and prevent additional spread of the virus, she said.
The National Guard's goal had also been to take a snapshot of those persons working in health care and public safety, all essential workers needed every day.
"You are wanting to reach those people who might be around those people who are getting sick or long-term care and identify those people early."
In Kimball County, only one person out of the 46 people tested on Thursday, April 9, tested positive for the coronavirus. That person had been a previously identified case and had been tested to see if the person had yet recovered.
To date, 28 people throughout the Panhandle Public Health District have tested positive for the coronavirus. Positive cases have been reported in Scotts Bluff County, Kimball County, Cheyenne

County and Box Butte County.
Ten people have recovered out of those 28 cases.
“We want to celebrate all those as they recover,” Schnell said. “That is a great thing to show you ... People recover and they move on. We have good results starting to show. People are getting better and moving on with life.”
As of presstime, 901 positive cases had been reported in the state. Twenty deaths have been reported.
Kim Engel, director of PPHD, reinforced the message of Gov. Pete Ricketts, “Stay Home. Stay Healthy. Stay Connected.” campaign.
“We are all aware that these have been highly unusual times,” Engel said. “...We have to remember this is not going to be the rest of our lives. It really is going to get back to normal and hopefully, sooner than later.
“He just really wanted us to try hard during this time,” Engel said of the 21-day campaign.
Ricketts has put into place directed health measures that are in effect. Directed health measures that limit restaurants to take-out or delivery options are in place through May 11. An additional directed health measure that resulted in the closure of salons and similar businesses is in place through April 30. Directed health measures that close schools and stopped sporting activities is in place until May 31.
PPHD has clarified information on drive-by parades. According to a directed health measure that was issued on Friday, April 9, gatherings, including parades, were disallowed. However. Ricketts noted on Tuesday that parades that involve people driving and staying in their cars are allowed. The intent of the measures is to avoid gatherings of people, Engel said.
“The leaders of the community are trying to keep people safe and be responsible,” Engel said of leaders planning events and trying to be cautious.
Information on the directed health measures, including the full language of the measures in place, are available on the governor’s website. PPHD has also put together resources on COVID-19, including exposure sites, business resources and more, on its website, www.pphd.org.
By Maunette Loeks

OWH: Owner of Nebraska Crossing Outlets plans to reopen mall this month amid pandemic

Nebraska Crossing Outlets will reopen to the public before the projected peak of coronavirus cases in Nebraska, the outdoor mall’s owner and developer said Tuesday.
Rod Yates said Nebraska Crossing has an opportunity to be a leader in the retail community and praised Gov. Pete Ricketts for “keeping the community on top of mind and working to get businesses open again.”
“We’re looking at the great opportunity to set some best practices and help our retailers open their portfolios across the country,” Yates said. “We are going to be the first shopping center that opens in North America.”
The president of the Nebraska Hospital Association, which represents 93 hospitals, said Tuesday that the action could “nullify our efforts to this point.”
“This move is in direct contradiction with public health guidelines and poses serious risks to the health of all Nebraskans,” Laura Redoutey said in a statement. “Quite simply, it’s irresponsible for a nonessential retailer to open its doors to the public in the middle of a pandemic.”

The outlet mall plans to have a “soft opening” on April 24 — only 15 days into Ricketts’ plea from earlier this month for Nebraskans to stay home for 21 days, a time period that would end April 30. Officials have said the state isn’t expected to reach the peak of COVID-19 cases and deaths until the end of April.

A “formal grand opening” would be in May, potentially as early as May 1, according to correspondence sent Friday to the more than 80 retail stores and restaurants in the mall, which sits along Interstate 80 near Gretna.

But Nebraska Crossing initially had decided on an earlier date for the soft grand opening — discussing the matter with Ricketts Thursday night.

“We have kept in close communication with the governor, and based on these conversations, we are taking steps to soft-open stores beginning the 18th of April,” according to an update sent to general managers Friday.

“Our governor, Pete Ricketts, has done a phenomenal job trying to create a safe community environment and ultimately setting goals to get businesses back to work,” an official letter said. “We have had weekly calls with the governor personally.”

When asked Tuesday about the outlet mall’s plans to open April 18, Yates said the soft opening date had been pushed to April 24. He provided The World-Herald with an updated letter sent to retailers on Tuesday that deleted the line about weekly calls with Ricketts.

At his daily coronavirus press conference, Ricketts on Tuesday said Nebraska Crossing leaders reached out to him to tell him of their plans.

“I did not ask them to open, but I said if you do, just follow the guidelines,” he said. “If companies are looking to be able to get prepared for some point down the road when those restrictions are loosened, that’s OK, but anybody who’s operating still needs to continue to follow all the guidelines.”

Ricketts referenced his “Six Rules to Keep Nebraska Healthy” decree and asked people to follow that until April 30. The rules advise staying at home, “no nonessential errands” and to “shop alone and only shop once a week,” among other things.

He declined to say whether the stores at Nebraska Crossing were essential or nonessential and didn’t acknowledge the disconnect between his rules and the outlet mall’s plans.

“We don’t make that distinction here in our state. That’s not something we’ve done,” he said. “We’re asking people to make that distinction as they look at their own needs.”

Yates said the soft opening date was pushed back a week because of retailer feedback. He said those companies wanted to open their stores at Nebraska Crossing as a “case study” to figure out how the rest of their stores can safely reopen.

Yates also said Nebraska Crossing was an attractive pick for a test case because of the variety of businesses at the shopping center. He also said Nebraska has fewer coronavirus cases than other states and is one of few states not under a government stay-at-home order — meaning employees still could go to work.

Nebraska Crossing never officially closed because of the pandemic, but nearly all the stores closed to customers because their corporate officials closed stores throughout the United States. Uniform Destination is one of the only stores that stayed open to the public, but it has a limit of three people in the store at one time.

Some stores still were open and providing curbside pickup for online orders, said Johanna Boston, the chief strategy officer for Nebraska Crossing.

For the soft and grand openings, stores are not required to open, Boston said, and the date could be

pushed back depending on additional virus cases.
“If tomorrow our numbers jump and we have a conversation with the governor, it could change,” she said. “But right now, we’re doing what we’ve been asked to do, which is to start getting people back to work in the safest environment we can create.”
Two general managers at Nebraska Crossing stores told The World-Herald that they’re worried about the pressure on corporate offices to reopen the stores and the risk of coronavirus exposure to employees and customers.
“There’s been absolutely no regard to Nebraska Crossing employees. None of us signed up to be guinea pigs,” one manager said. The World-Herald is not naming the managers because they feared retribution for speaking out. “We all have family. I’m not willing to bring that to my family. I’m not willing to be a test subject for you guys, and neither are my employees.”
Even a May opening seemed too soon.
“We haven’t even hit our peak in Nebraska yet,” the manager said. “That’s ridiculous. I understand it’s going to be a long time, but there has to be a protocol set in place that needs to be tested before we open to the public.”
The other general manager was concerned about out-of-state visitors that the outlet mall usually attracts, which could lead to additional exposure from elsewhere.
Ricketts said that’s a problem the state faces, and he has asked people who come here from out of state to self-quarantine for 14 days.
“I gotta tell you, I just don’t think you’re going to see a lot of traveling this time when everybody knows we’re supposed to stay at home,” Ricketts said.
Yates said officials are taking several precautions for the scheduled opening.
The mall has purchased 100 “infrared non-contact instant-read thermometers” — one for each store — that employees will use to check their temperature upon arrival for their first shift. Store managers can decide whether to offer the thermometer to customers before they enter the store, Yates said.
They also have bought 200 shield guards that will be installed at registers between customers and employees.
Officials also are encouraging customers and employees to wear masks and gloves and will recommend that shoppers shouldn’t walk around in groups. Also, the janitorial staff is using misting disinfectant to clean all bathrooms, storefront entrances, kiosks and common areas, and will add additional wipe stations in common areas.
“Anything we do is going to be very controlled,” Yates said. “We’re not going to do any mass events that attract hundreds of people. We’re going to slowly ease ourselves into the process of getting ourselves open.”
Sarah Schram, the health director of the Sarpy/Cass Health Department, said she was unaware of Nebraska Crossing’s plan to reopen until she saw news media reports about it. She said the wording of the state health directive does not include retail stores in the definition of gatherings. Therefore, she said, retail stores in Sarpy and Cass Counties do not have to adhere to the 10-person limit, but people would have to stay 6 feet away from one another.
“We’re really encouraging people to limit those public interactions if you are out and about,” she said, adding that people should continue to wash their hands, keep a 6-foot distance, avoid gathering and stay home. “Those are the small steps that everyone can do to really help limit the spread in our community.”
Chief Deputy Sarpy County Sheriff Greg London said his office won’t station a deputy at the mall but

would respond to calls of people breaking the directed health measure, if that occurs.
Boston said people will need to decide if they are comfortable going to the outlet mall to shop.
“Some people are going to say, ‘Great’ and other people are going to say, ‘You’re crazy,’ ” she said.
“The bottom line is, everybody has to use their best judgment.”
By Alia Conley

LJS: Gretna outlet mall to reopen next week

Nebraska Crossing Outlets has decided it's been closed long enough.
The mall in Gretna announced Tuesday that it plans to reopen April 24 after being closed for about four weeks because of the coronavirus pandemic.
"We are looking for leadership and developing best practices for landlords and retailers to work together to bring physical shopping centers back online and creating safe conditions for our customers and employees," owner Rod Yates said in an email. "Nebraska Crossing will be a case study and we are in a leadership position to make this happen."
Yates termed the April 24 date a "soft opening," with a more formal grand opening set for sometime in May.
Gov. Pete Ricketts' statewide directed health measure requires schools and a number of businesses to close through the end of May, but malls aren't one of them. Though a number of malls have chosen to close, others have remained open, including SouthPointe Pavilions in Lincoln.
At his daily news conference Tuesday, Ricketts pointed out that his order did not close malls nor did it designate businesses as essential or nonessential.
Any malls or stores that did close did so on a voluntary basis, he said.
Ricketts did point out that, however, the temporary rule limiting public gatherings to 10 people or less does apply to malls.
"Anybody who opens up or is open has to follow that rule," he said.
Nebraska Crossing Outlets never officially closed, but it was effectively shut down because nearly all of its stores were closed.
It's not clear how many of the mall's stores will reopen April 24. Many national retailers have shut down their stores indefinitely, including a number of tenants at the mall. Yates did not say how many stores will be open.
"The stores asked us to kick off the process of getting open, and we are getting great feedback subject to getting a large percentage (of stores) open," he said.
A letter to tenants that Yates provided to media laid out a number of protective steps the mall plans to take, including purchasing 100 infrared thermometers for stores to use on employees and, if they wish, customers; installing plastic shields at checkout counters; and encouraging customers and employees to wear masks.
By Matt Olberding

AP: Nebraska mall plans to reopen despite climbing virus cases

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — An upscale outlet mall near Omaha plans to reopen later this month even as the number of coronavirus cases and deaths continue to grow and even though a statewide order prohibits gatherings of more than 10 people.
The owner of the Nebraska Crossing Outlets says their experience will be a case study of best

practices for other malls, though it is not immediately clear how many stores will reopen when the mall does and how the facility will comply with state-ordered social distancing protocols.
“We’re looking at the great opportunity to set some best practices and help our retailers open their portfolios across the country,” owner Rod Yates said to the Omaha World-Herald. Yates didn’t immediately respond Tuesday to a message from The Associated Press.
Retail analyst Jon Reily said he doesn’t think the mall will be successful with its reopening plans because consumers will likely be reluctant to shop there.
“People are very cautious,” said Reily, who is senior vice president of global commerce strategy at Isobar. “I don’t know if old patterns of going to the mall to buy nonessential items are really going to stick.”
Nebraska is one of the few states that still allows malls to be open even though many businesses are closed because the state prohibits gatherings of more than 10 people and limits restaurants and bars to take out and delivery services.
The outlet sits next to a heavily traveled stretch of Interstate 80 about halfway between Omaha and Lincoln. Douglas, Sarpy and Lancaster counties, which include Omaha and Lincoln and their suburbs, had seen a total of 349 cases as of Tuesday morning. That’s about 40% of the statewide total of 871 cases of COVID-19 and 18 deaths linked to the disease.
The mall plans to reopen April 24, which would be roughly the same time state officials expect the number of Nebraska coronavirus cases to peak.
Gov. Pete Ricketts said Tuesday the stores are free to reopen as long as they follow the state’s social-distancing guidelines.
“We didn’t ask them to close, and we didn’t ask them to open,” he said at his weekday coronavirus news conference.
Ricketts, a Republican, has encouraged residents to shop alone and limit their excursions to one trip per week, but he hasn’t ordered any formal restrictions. He said he discussed the matter with the shopping center’s managers, and told them that if they chose to open, they needed to follow the state rules.
Mall officials say they have purchased 100 thermometers for each store to use to check employees at the start of each day, and they plan to install 200 plastic shields at registers to separate customers and employees. Officials plan to encourage employees and customers to wear masks and gloves and avoid walking around in groups at the outdoor mall.
“Anything we do is going to be very controlled,” Yates said. “We’re not going to do any mass events that attract hundreds of people. We’re going to slowly ease ourselves into the process of getting ourselves open.”
It could be difficult for stores to maintain social distancing if crowds of shoppers returned, but Craig Johnson, president of consumer consultancy Customer Growth Partners, said he doesn’t think the mall is likely to have that problem.
“My guess is they will be happy and delighted if a store gets crowded enough where people have to worry about their six-foot radius,” Johnson said. “I just don’t think they’re going to get a big crowd.”
By Josh Funk

KLKN: Gretna outlet mall to reopen April 24

The owner of a Gretna outlet mall says the mall plans to reopen April 24, despite concerns about the spread of COVID-19.

Governor Pete Ricketts says Nebraska Crossing can reopen if it wants to, so long as it follows state health orders.
Ricketts said the state hasn't ordered any shopping centers to close and that those that have closed did so voluntarily. What Nebraska has done is issue limits on crowd sizes, which Ricketts said the mall would have to abide by if it does reopen.
When asked about concerns regarding people from out of state visiting the mall, Ricketts says he doesn't think many people will be traveling in general.
Owner Rod Yates sent the following statement to Channel 8 Eyewitness News:
" Retailers are looking for leadership and developing best practices for landlords and retailers to work together to bring physical shopping centers back online and creating safe conditions for our customers and employees. Nebraska Crossing will be in a leadership position to make this happen. Our global retailers have asked us to take on this role and be the first shopping center back open in the U.S. We will walk before we run here and obviously if you have any underlying health issues we will encourage shoppers and/or employees to not participate in the center's soft reopening. Communication and new best practices are key. Median age of our workers is 35."
If it did reopen, the mall would be one of the first of its kind to do so in the nation.
A day before it was set to reopen after suspending hours at most stores, Gateway Mall said on its website it will continue to stay closed through April 30. Some of the mall's exterior restaurants have decided to stay open and are able to provide food for takeout, curbside pick-up and/or delivery depending on the restaurant's operations.
By Brent BonFleur

NY Post: Nebraska mall plans to reopen despite rise in coronavirus cases

A Nebraska outlet mall plans to reopen as the number of coronavirus cases continues to rise in the state.
The Nebraska Crossing Outlets, located about halfway between Lincoln and Omaha, announced that it aims to reopen on April 24 — when health officials predict cases to peak in the state.
Outlet owner Rod Yates said the mall would hold a "soft opening" and could serve as a test site for how businesses can best go about reopening during the pandemic.
"We're looking at the great opportunity to set some best practices and help our retailers open their portfolios across the country," Yates told the Omaha World-Herald.
Nebraska is among a select few states that still allow malls to remain open even if most businesses are closed because of the restrictions on gatherings.
The state had documented more than 890 coronavirus cases as of Tuesday night, alongside 20 related deaths, after recording its first patient back on March 6.
Gov. Pete Ricketts, a Republican, has urged residents to only shop once a week and to do so alone, though he hasn't issued any formal restrictions beyond the state's gathering limit.
Ricketts said the mall and other stores are free to open as long as they follow the social-distancing order.
"We didn't ask them to close, and we didn't ask them to open," he said at a coronavirus news briefing.
"If companies are looking to be able to get prepared for some point down the road when those restrictions are loosened, that's OK, but anybody who's operating still needs to continue to follow all the guidelines."

Local health experts sounded the alarm that the opening could undo any positive containment that has come from people staying home.
But representatives from the mall said they're taking precautions. The mall has purchased 100 thermometers for each store to use to check employees at the start of each day. They also will install 200 plastic shields at registers to separate shoppers and workers.
Both shoppers and employees will be encouraged to wear masks and gloves.
"Anything we do is going to be very controlled," Yates said. "We're not going to do any mass events that attract hundreds of people. We're going to slowly ease ourselves into the process of getting ourselves open."
The open-air mall features stores from Coach, Nike, Kate Spade and others.
Mall officials already pushed back its soft opening once, from a planned April 18 date, and could do so again if cases spike, according to Johanna Boston, the chief strategy officer for Nebraska Crossing.
"If tomorrow our numbers jump and we have a conversation with the governor, it could change," she told the World-Herald.
"But right now, we're doing what we've been asked to do, which is to start getting people back to work in the safest environment we can create."
By Vincent Barone

OWH: Soon you could pick up some groceries — maybe even some toilet paper! — with your takeout

LINCOLN — You may soon be able to order a side of toilet paper with that Big Mac and fries.
On Tuesday, Gov. Pete Ricketts announced a relaxing of rules that will allow restaurants in Nebraska to sell grocery products like milk, bread, cereal and eggs, as well as paper towels and toilet paper, directly to consumers.
Zoe Olson of the Nebraska Restaurant Association said the change will give struggling restaurants a "new revenue stream" to stay open and keep employees from being laid off. It also offers another outlet for consumers to buy products that are in short supply, she said.
"We are pleased that this temporary retail service has been allowed," Olson said.
She said that a projected 6% of all restaurants will close permanently because of the pandemic. So any way to increase sales is welcome, Olson said.
She said the change could really make a difference in rural communities that may have a local tavern but no local grocery store.
Tuesday was Takeout Tuesday, as declared by Ricketts, and the governor said he's been trying to help eateries stay open by buying takeout lunches at downtown Lincoln restaurants.
By Paul Hammel

AP: Nebraska to let restaurants sell bread, milk, toilet paper

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraskans who order takeout during the coronavirus pandemic may soon be able to get a side of bread, milk and toilet paper from their local restaurant, Gov. Pete Ricketts announced Tuesday.
Ricketts said he is relaxing state rules that govern what local eateries can sell to give them more flexibility as they struggle with sharp declines in business. The move would allow restaurants to sell food and other goods not labeled for retail sale, including eggs, butter, cereal, produce and

disinfectants.
The Nebraska Restaurant Association predicts that 6% of the state's restaurants will close permanently because of the pandemic. Temporarily loosening the regulations could help some survive, said Zoe Olson, the group's executive director.
Olson said restaurants could help fill the gaps left by grocery stores that have sold out of high-demand staples, particularly in rural areas. She said restaurants will likely advertise what they have available on their social media pages.
"This is another revenue stream, another way to get our staff back to work," she said.
Ricketts said the change is designed to preserve jobs and help meet the public's demand for products that have become scarce. Restaurants use different supply chains than grocery stores and tend to buy more products in bulk.
"This will help cut some of that red tape," he said.
The change was possible because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently relaxed its regulations on bulk-food purchases, said Steve Wellman, director of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.
The announcement coincided with "Takeout Tuesday," an earlier declaration by Ricketts to encourage residents to order from restaurants during the pandemic. Ricketts has ordered all of the state's restaurants and bars to close their dining areas for the next few weeks and only offer takeout and delivery services. The rules are designed to discourage large public gatherings and prevent the coronavirus from spreading and overwhelming Nebraska's hospitals.
Nebraska had 901 confirmed cases and 20 deaths as of Tuesday evening, according to new data provided by the state Department of Health and Human Services. More than 10,800 people have tested negative. The number of new cases was sharply lower on Tuesday, at 34. The number was 64 on Monday and 100 on Sunday.
Another COVID-19 death has been reported in Nebraska, bringing the state's total to 18, state health officials said.
The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported late Monday that the state's 18th virus-caused death was that of a man in his 90s with underlying health conditions living in Washington County. The state stood at 871 confirmed coronavirus cases Tuesday morning, while nearly 10,500 people have tested negative, according to the department's tracking data.
For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough 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, including pneumonia, and death.
Ricketts' current plan will see schools closed and businesses and social gatherings limited until at least April 30.
By Grant Schulte and Margery A. Beck

OWH: Grace: What's happening behind closed doors? Domestic violence calls spike on Easter

It's the silence that has Amy Richardson worried.
Hotline calls to the Women's Center for Advancement, the main resource for domestic violence services in Omaha, are way down over the past six weeks from the same period last year. So are the number of protection orders and hospital visits arranged by the agency.
The Shelter, which Catholic Charities runs for victims of abuse, is down to two families. It has a

capacity of eight. Methodist Health System's emergency response for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence also has seen its numbers fall off.

All of this is occurring more than a month into the coronavirus shutdown — a time when victims' advocates, police leaders and public officials are warning about a spike in domestic violence. People cooped up at home, the stresses of the pandemic itself, the economic toll from record job loss and the lack of outlets like jobs, gyms and parks: All are predicted to be contributors to escalating domestic tensions.

The fact that the agencies' official numbers show a drop belies what advocates believe is happening behind closed doors.

"It gives us goosebumps," said Richardson, president and CEO of the midtown-based Women's Center. "You know it's not stopping."

Richardson believes victims of domestic violence feel more trapped than ever. Their abusers are most likely around more, have more control over victims' phones or devices and are limiting their ability to call for help. The shutdown might lead victims to believe that help is not available when it still is.

Police data on domestic violence calls are mixed.

Lincoln police reported a 20% drop in domestic disturbance calls and a 10% drop in domestic abuse calls in the past six weeks compared to the five-year average.

The Douglas County Sheriff's Office reported that its domestic violence call load doubled in March, from 35 last year to 78 this year.

Omaha police reported little change in domestic violence calls for the month of March, when the first local cases of community spread were reported and when restaurants, schools and many businesses were closed to halt the spread of the highly contagious virus.

Omaha police responded to 1,060 domestic violence calls last month, compared to 1,059 in March 2019. Yet, figures for April show that the number of calls ticked up, by an average of five of day, from 38 per day in the first two weeks of April last year to almost 43 this year.

Some days saw big jumps. On Easter, Omaha police responded to 53 domestic violence calls, up from 40 on April 12, 2019.

Police Capt. Anna Colón, who oversees the department's special investigations section that includes domestic violence, said she believes that early in the pandemic response, people were hunkered down, "really afraid of the virus" and that may have led to fewer calls. She said victims might have been afraid to go to the hospital, too.

Now, she said, calls are ticking up along with household tensions and worries about finances, health and the lack of an end date to the pandemic.

She urged victims to arrange a backup system for help — such as using code words or putting distress signs in windows to signal neighbors to call. She also said the public should be aware of the heightened risk for victims and to call 911 if they see or hear anything amiss.

She said that the pandemic does not change the police responsibility and that officers will make arrests if they think it's justified.

"Just because we have a pandemic going on, we're not going to forsake the law," Colón said. "I don't foresee not taking people to jail."

Catholic Charities says it has plenty of room in its shelter, but victims might not realize it's still open. The nonprofit saw a 300% jump in families seeking food from North and South Omaha pantries it runs, indicating the need is growing. Its domestic violence hotline is staffed 24/7.

"We are open, and services are running," said Theresa Swoboda, vice president of program services.

The Methodist Health System's sexual assault nurse examiner program reports that its numbers are down from last year. In March 2019, the program saw 34 patients, eight of whom had injuries from intimate partner abuse. This March, the total was 19 patients, four with intimate partner abuse injuries.

Methodist offers the specialized assistance at its two Omaha hospitals: Methodist at 83rd and Dodge Streets and Methodist Women's, near 190th Street and West Dodge Road.

"We're here and ready," said Jen Tran, team leader in forensic nursing. "We still maintain the same level of care."

That's the message Richardson of the Women's Center wants to deliver loud and clear. Yes, the agency based at 3801 Harney St. might be closed to foot traffic. But people remain ready to help. The main office phone goes to trained staffers during business hours, and the hotline is answered 24/7.

"We're trying to get the word out," Richardson said. "It's a really dangerous situation."

The WCA hotline calls are down by one-third this year for the period of March 1 through April 9 compared to the same time in 2019. Last year, the WCA hotline logged 1,050 calls during that almost six-week period. This year, the WCA has received 698 calls.

Last year, the WCA helped 84 victims get protection orders between March 1 and April 9. This year during that period, the number was 33.

Victims' stories paint a dire picture and show the complications of dealing with domestic abuse during the pandemic. Without naming clients, the WCA offered up three examples.

The first involves a woman whose underlying health conditions put her at higher risk of complications from coronavirus exposure. She needs a protection order but can't risk leaving her house to be exposed to the virus in order to have the protection order notarized, as is required. The Women's Center is working to get its notaries eligible for online notarization, which is allowed under a recent executive order issued by Gov. Pete Ricketts.

The second woman was able to call for help only after her abuser was hospitalized. That gave her a chance to get a protection order and make a safety plan.

A third woman fled from her abuser, becoming homeless in the process. She tested positive for COVID-19. Her diagnosis meant that she needed a place to stay where she wouldn't put others at risk, so the Women's Center had to find alternate housing.

Richardson said the actual number of domestic violence cases is not known, but she's banking on this: There are probably more cases than have been reported

"It's definitely a dangerous time," she said, "and we better be prepared."

By Erin Grace

NTV: Who has the power to 're-open' the country?

The question for some is still who has the power to "re-open" the country.

President Donald Trump said on Monday he has "total authority" to decide when the country re-opens for business.

He said he will decide when businesses across the country open, and people return to work.

On Tuesday, NTV asked Governor Pete Ricketts about the president's remarks.

The governor said he'll always do what's best for Nebraska, and that he has worked with the federal government throughout the pandemic.

NTV also reached out to Nebraska's congressional representatives to get their take.

Representative Adrian Smith telling NTV News, “I appreciate the President’s tireless leadership during this unprecedented time in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. I’m sure the President appreciates the role that states play in this and I hope no level of government oversteps their bounds.”
We also reached out to Senators Fischer and Sasse, but so far, we haven't heard back.

LJS: COVID-19 claims two more residents of Adams assisted-living center

Two more residents of an Adams assisted-living center struggling with the spread of the coronavirus have died, the regional health department that serves Gage County said Tuesday.
A woman in her 80s died Thursday after being transferred to Lincoln, and a man in his 70s with underlying health conditions died Tuesday at Gold Crest Retirement Center, Public Health Solutions Director Kim Showalter said.
Their cases follow the March 31 death of a woman in her 90s from the same assisted-living center, about 30 miles south of Lincoln.
Also Tuesday, Showalter reported a woman in her 20s who works at Gold Crest was confirmed to have the virus, bringing the total number of cases connected to residents and employees to 24.
The staffer, one of six employees now confirmed to have the virus, was isolating at home and being monitored by the department.
Of the 22 coronavirus-linked deaths reported in the state, at least eight were residents of group homes, including two in Douglas County, two in Hall County and one in Washington County.
Darrell Dibben, a 90-year-old former Dana College professor who died Sunday, had been a resident of a Blair assisted-living facility, Carter Place, which was temporarily closed after 19 coronavirus cases were linked to its residents and staff by the end of March.
Residents were moved to a number of neighboring health care facilities and hospitals. While empty, a complete deep cleaning of the facility was to be done.
Carter Place has not reopened.
Dibben, a Korean War veteran, had a 30-year tenure at Dana College, where he taught communications, language arts and education classes, according to an obituary in the Washington County Pilot-Tribune and Enterprise.
Dibben also helped start the Dana College radio station KDCV-FM, and was manager and adviser of the station until his retirement in 1995.
Also Tuesday, Douglas County reported the death of a man in his 60s with underlying health conditions. In all, COVID-19 has claimed the lives of seven Douglas County residents.
And in Custer County, officials reported a man in his 80s with underlying health conditions had died.
By Peter Salter

GII: Latest total: 251 COVID-19 cases in three-county area

The number of lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases in the three-county area continues to increase, going from 211 cases Monday to 251 on Tuesday.
Central District Health Department says the total consists of 235 cases in Hall County, 13 in Hamilton County and three in Merrick County.
In a news release, Central District Health said, “We continue to be challenged with not having enough tests,” and have asked the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services “to work

with us in obtaining additional testing. We are doing our best to test those who are high-priority at this time."
"There are persons who are frustrated with not being able to get tested," the release says. "It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during and after this event. Everyone reacts differently, and your own feelings will change over time. Notice and accept how you feel. Taking care of your emotional health during the pandemic will help you think clearly and react to the needs to protect yourself and your family. Self-care during COVID-19 will help your long-term healing."
Because of the continued spread of COVID-19, Central District Health is not open to the public.
"We will answer phones and emails as we are able. We ask your patience as we process more than 1,000 calls per day," the news release says.
Direct any calls to CDHD at (308) 385-5175 or use the DHHS COVID-19 Information line. That number is (402) 552-6645.

NET: As Grand Island Cases Increase, Health Officials Expand Capacity And Patient Transfer Options

Grand Island is preparing for a surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations. As case numbers escalate, local health officials have responded by expanding hospital capacity and bolstering plans to transfer patients out of town for care if needed.

St. Francis Hospital in Grand Island can currently provide breathing support to 27 COVID-19 patients. Around 13 of those ventilators are currently in use.
Concerns around the city's potential need for more hospital beds and respiratory equipment have fueled efforts to bolster local healthcare capacity: as of Tuesday afternoon, Grand Island's case count is 184, with 214 total cases in Hall County. That number will likely increase in the coming days.
Hospital president Ed Holleran said the CHI Health Network, which owns St. Francis, has been successful in increasing the number of patients it can serve locally.
"As it comes to emergency preparedness, healthcare does this regularly," he said. "We are always conducting disaster drills, training exercises, always trying to predict what's next, what could be out there."
St. Francis Hospital recently reopened its seventh floor, which houses extra beds; that's increased total capacity to 150 patients, up from around 100 during a typical flu season. At least 20 of them are occupied with confirmed COVID patients, while more unconfirmed patients are also being cared for.
Holleran said similar tactics can be used to expand the hospital's number of ventilators. Most CHI facilities have cancelled or aggressively downscaled all non-essential procedures, which has opened up some ventilators for temporary redistribution.
"We reached out to our division through our own incident command structure that we have... [saying] I'd like to increase my inventory on-site of ventilators by three," he said. "And within less than 24 hours, I had three ventilators from the Nebraska Heart Hospital sent out to Grand Island to put in my inventory."
And if Grand Island were to hit full capacity, St. Francis staffs its own ambulances for transferring possible overflow patients.
Providers statewide have also agreed to accept cases outside their own networks in an attempt to accommodate surges. Governor Pete Ricketts said that plan has already been implemented in some cases; an outbreak at the Carter House longterm care facility in Blair forced residents to relocate to

nearby facilities for monitoring.
"Part of our plan was always to be able to move patients around, to take a statewide approach to our healthcare system," Gov. Ricketts said. "So we can leverage where we had capacity in one part of our state if we were coming up on our capacity in another part. And that's what we've done in Grand Island."
While the exact trajectory of COVID-19 in Grand Island remains to be seen, four patients have already been transferred from St. Francis Hospital to other centers in Omaha and Lincoln.
By Christina Stella

NET: UNMC Expert: Some Social Distancing Can Be Relaxed After Peak

Dr. Mark Rupp is a professor and chief of infectious diseases at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. He says life will be somewhat unusual for some time.
"I agree that most of the models look like they'll be peaking in Nebraska sometime toward the end of April or maybe even the first week of May," Rupp said. "But after that, we're going to continue to see cases of COVID-19. It isn't miraculously just going to disappear until we have widespread immunity within the population either because of infection or because we develop a vaccine."
Rupp says in the period between the peak of the pandemic and the development of a vaccine, some social distancing measures can be relaxed. However, communities will still have to be careful.
Public health officials will be on the lookout for cases and small outbreaks, and Rupp hopes they will be more prepared with the capability to test new cases quickly and test a person's close contacts.
That period of time will also mark a return to the in depth contact investigations of COVID-19 cases, and contacts will be asked to quarantine.
Rupp believes with those measures, society can return to a new normal, but when it takes place will depend on the case curve.
The timeline could also vary in different areas, but Rupp doesn't think communities need to wait for zero cases of COVID-19, but could instead look for a downward trend in cases before they start to relax restrictions.
By Allison Mollenkamp

AP: US backs contentious meat-plant changes with supply at risk

As American meat producers are forced to shutter and slow output at plants amid coronavirus outbreaks, the U.S. government is giving companies a green light to run some facilities at higher speeds — something experts and labor advocates have long said is dangerous for workers.
In April, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service allowed five poultry plants — two owned by Tyson Foods Inc., and three by Wayne Farms LLC — to run their slaughter lines at higher speeds. The agency also gave approval to Foster Farms in March.
"This decision is endangering blue collar essential workers at a time when we need to think about protecting them and their communities," said Debbie Berkowitz, director of the Worker Safety and Health program at the National Employment Law Project.
The coronavirus pandemic is now spreading from urban cities into rural areas where much of America's food production takes place.
Just in the past week or so, hundreds of poultry, beef and pork workers have tested positive for the virus, leading the likes of Cargill Inc. and Smithfield Foods Inc. to shutter plants. Cargill operates

plants in Schuyler and Nebraska City, while Smithfield employs 2,200 at a plant in Crete. Neither company has reported a positive case of the virus in Nebraska.
Lincoln Premium Poultry, which remains open and employs 1,100 workers at its Fremont plant, reported its first positive case of the virus on Monday.
Nationally, two people employed at a Tyson Foods plant in Georgia died from complications due to the virus, according to union officials.
Slaughterhouse Shutdowns Raise Concern for Farmers and Consumers
The outbreak is highlighting the often dangerous role that workers play to provide the world with plentiful, affordable food.
"We're working hard to protect our team members during this challenging and ever-changing situation, while continuing to fulfill our critical role of helping feed people across the country," said Morgan Watchous, a spokesperson for Tyson. "We are addressing line speed on a case-by-case basis. At this point, we haven't made any drastic increases, and in some cases, we're slowing down the line to allow for social distancing and safety of our team members."
Frank Singleton, a spokesman for Wayne Farms, said "line speeds are controlled and reviewed by USDA, so we follow their guidelines and recommendations, including on this waiver."
Foster Farms didn't immediately respond to requests for comment on line-speed changes.
Plants have to seek permission for the line-speed changes under a USDA program called the New Poultry Inspection Service (NPIS). While waivers have been available since the program was started in 2018, companies are drawing backlash by applying for them at a time when many employees are already at risk of getting sick. The increased speeds could add further pressure on vulnerable workers, critics say.
Poultry workers already suffer from high rates of on-the-job injuries, including carpal tunnel syndrome and nerve damage due to the repetitive motions required to do their jobs, a 2015 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found. The concern, as the National Employment Law Project has noted, is that faster line speeds will worsen these already dangerous conditions.
"Allowing line speed waivers at a time when poultry workers are getting sick and dying around the country," partly because "the federal government, including the USDA, has failed to require any protections for these essential workers, is so dangerous, to not only workers and their families, but to the whole community," said Berkowitz of the National Employment Law Project.
The NPIS program allows poultry plants to run their lines at a rate of 175 birds slaughtered per minute. Standard line speeds run as fast as 140 birds per minute. The program also requires regular pathogen testing and data sharing with the USDA.
The program has been controversial since long before the pandemic. While supported by industry, it has been opposed by groups ranging from advocacy organizations like Food and Water Watch and the Humane League, as well as unions and worker safety groups like NELP. Originally proposed under the Obama administration, the line-speed change garnered so much opposition that it was not enacted. The Trump administration's USDA reversed that decision in 2018.
By Deena Shanker and Lydia Mulvany

LJS: Property tax relief petition drive abandoned

The petition drive to place a 35% property tax reduction proposal on the November general election ballot was abandoned Tuesday, essentially closing the door on the possibility of moving toward

major property tax relief this year.
Supporters of the proposed constitutional amendment announced an end to their petition drive, citing the difficulty and danger of trying to obtain signatures with the outbreak of the coronavirus.
"With public gatherings and even personal contact limited, there is no reasonable expectation that we can finish the task without needless risk to the health and safety of our circulation network and to Nebraskans in general," the group TRUE Nebraskans announced on its website.
The organization needed to acquire more than 120,000 valid signatures from registered voters by July 2 to gain a slot on the November ballot.
That had always seemed to be a major, if not insurmountable, obstacle for a petition drive that did not rely on costly professional assistance and management, but supporters had argued that they could overcome those odds.
With the collapse of the petition drive, property tax relief remains in the hands of the Legislature, but it has been forced into an indefinite recess by the pandemic, and when senators return to Lincoln they will confront the prospect of sharply declining revenues that would appear to rule out any substantial local property tax relief.
"We've got to figure out some way to achieve significant property tax relief," Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard said as the petition drive dissolved.
"But the coronavirus has shut down the economy," he said, "and we're going to have a difficult time when it opens up again."
Substantial property tax relief is difficult to achieve in the Legislature, Erdman said, when it takes at least 33 votes to override a filibuster waged by opponents.
"Finding 33 votes is nearly impossible," he said.
The proposed constitutional amendment would have provided a state income tax credit equal to 35% of local property taxes paid.
And that, in turn, would have triggered either state government budget cuts or sharp increases in state sales or income taxes, or both.
Last year, Erdman introduced a proposal (LR3CA) that would have allowed Nebraskans to vote on the proposed 35% property tax reduction option which, he said, would have provided $1.3 billion in property tax relief.
Erdman's proposed constitutional amendment never gained traction in the Legislature.
By Don Walton

LJS: Abortion survey shows some Nebraska candidates would not make exception to save mother's life

Right to Life survey of candidates for Nebraska offices shows that some state senators facing reelection would not support abortion to save the life of a mother.
While four senators said they were opposed to abortion for most reasons, five senators said they would grant no exceptions for abortions. A number of state senators did not respond to the survey.
The Right to Life survey question asked: Under what circumstances, if any, do you believe that abortion should be legal?
Five incumbent senators either answered no to the exception of preventing the mother's death, or left the answer blank after saying they would permit abortion in no cases.
Those senators were Julie Slama of Peru, Joni Albrecht of Thurston, Bruce Bostelman of Brainard, Mike Hilgers of Lincoln and Steve Halloran of Hastings.

Hilgers and Halloran both left the box blank, but Halloran did so after answering that he favored no circumstances that abortion should be legal. Hilgers commented on the survey: "Abortion is never necessary to protect the life of the mother."

Slama and Bostelman said their positions related to the principle of double effect.

"There is a clear moral difference between an abortionist directly killing a baby and a treatment that permits her death as a side effect of a treatment of a mother where there is no other alternative," Slama said.

Bostelman said there are "extremely unusual" instances in which a mother may receive treatment that may lead to the demise of an unborn child. It's a secondary consequence of life-saving treatment, not a procedure aimed at killing a child, he said.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops distinguishes between direct abortions and terminations that happen incidental to a life-saving medical procedure or treatment of a condition or disease of the mother.

National Right to Life's position grants an exception for medical emergency to save the life of the mother. That exception is in the Nebraska fetal pain law, the abortion ban at more than 20 weeks passed in 2010, and it is in this session's bill (LB814) that would ban in most cases dismemberment of a live fetus during an abortion.

"It's in all of our legislation," said Nebraska Right to Life Executive Director Julie Schmit-Albin. "We don't posit legislation without a medical emergency exception, because we know we'd get challenged immediately."

The wording of those bills allow for abortion in medical emergencies in which reasonable medical judgment says it would avert the death of the pregnant woman or substantial and irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function.

Senators who say in these surveys they would not allow abortion in medical emergencies to save the life of the mother are not standing on that principle when they have voted for these abortion bills that have exceptions to save a mother's life, Schmit-Albin said.

By JoAnne Young

OWH: NU system anticipates uncertainty, $50 million-plus shortfall from coronavirus pandemic

The University of Nebraska system expects a $50 million shortfall this budget year because of the coronavirus crisis, the university said Tuesday.

The effect of the crisis on salaries and the potential for program cuts won't be known until state tax receipts, enrollment projections and other budgetary factors are clear, NU said.

This budget year, which ends June 30, is only the beginning of the "economic pain" to be felt by the NU system because of the coronavirus outbreak, according to a letter by NU leaders to students, faculty and staffers.

The hardship will continue into the next budget year. "We would be naive not to think so," said Chris Kabourek, an NU vice president and the chief financial officer.

NU also has called for a hiring freeze, limiting travel and big purchases, and reviewing construction projects to see if any can be delayed, the letter says.

"Each of these steps is designed to preserve as much cash as possible in the short term to help us address the challenges ahead," said the letter, signed by NU President Ted Carter and the campus chancellors.

The shortfall of “at least $50 million” results from residence hall refunds, sports and event cancellations, health care costs and other factors. Like most universities and colleges, the NU system has sent most of its students home, to complete the semester online.
One bit of good news, the letter says, is that the federal economic stimulus act (the CARES Act) will give some relief to students and campuses. The university awaits guidance from the federal government on the use of the money.
The University of Nebraska system will receive about $31.6 million for its four campuses: Lincoln, Omaha, Kearney and the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. Half the money must go to students to cover child care, health care and other hardships caused by the crisis.
A portion but not all of that money should help reduce the shortfall, Kabourek said. The money is expected to arrive this month.
NU said it hopes to apply some of that money to student support, enrollment and retention efforts, and other services.
“We know that we have asked a great deal of you as we have adjusted” to this crisis, the letter says.
NU said it’s also looking for ways to make the university system “more accessible for our 51,000 students and future generations” of students.
By Rick Ruggles

LJS: NU anticipates $50 million hit from economic fallout of coronavirus

University of Nebraska administrators are anticipating at least a $50 million hit to the system's budget for the spring semester alone as part of the economic pain caused by the coronavirus pandemic.
In a letter to students, faculty and staff Tuesday, NU President Ted Carter said unexpected costs and revenue losses have created "significant budgetary challenges."
"While there are too many unknowns at this stage to fully quantify the impact, housing refunds, athletic and event cancellations, frontline health care costs and other factors will result in a shortfall of at least $50 million this fiscal year," Carter wrote.
"And as we prepare for next year's budget, which begins in just over two months, our revenues are likely to take a significant hit even under the very best of circumstances," he added.
NU isn't alone and, in fact, may be in a better position than other Big Ten Conference institutions. The University of Minnesota said COVID-19 could cause a $300 million budget shortfall; Rutgers University is bracing for a $200 million hit; and the University of Wisconsin forecasts losing $170 million.
To get ahead of the coming financial troubles, Carter said NU would:
* Implement a hiring freeze, with exceptions only for "mission-critical" positions.
* Cut spending by 3% in the final quarter of the fiscal year at each of its four campuses in Lincoln, Omaha and Kearney, as well as at the central administration office.
* Limit travel and major purchases to those that are "time-sensitive."
* Review capital construction projects to see if any can be delayed.
"Each of these steps is designed to preserve as much cash as possible in the short term to help us address the challenges ahead," Carter said.
NU had about six months of cash on hand at the end of its last fiscal year, according to Chris Kabourek, vice president for business and finance, an amount that put it behind similar-sized institutions.

Unlike many of those universities, however, Nebraska's state constitution forbids the university from securing more liquidity through bonds or other lines of credit. NU can only bond for capital construction.
Carter said in his letter that NU is watching state tax receipts and the ongoing budget process at the state level before it decides to cut any programs or impose salary cuts as the university seeks to "be a good partner" to state government.
If the fallout from the economic side to the pandemic continues when NU embarks on building a new two-year budget later this year, Kabourek said: "Every option is on the table."
"Obviously, we'll try to minimize the impact to students and services as much as we can," he said. "But I think it would be naive for any of us to think the university won't be significantly impacted by these events."
The newest economic blow comes on the heels of a major belt-tightening across the university system less than two years ago.
Throughout 2017 and 2018, NU and 10 "budget-response teams" worked to close a $46 million budget gap caused by a loss in state appropriations and increased operational and staffing costs.
Closing the budget shortfall required an increase to tuition charged to students — 5.4% in the first year and 3.2% in the second year — as well as a series of budget cuts across several non-academic areas of the university system and leaving several openings unfilled.
At UNL, that meant eliminating a total of 31 positions, as well as relying on fees to fund other campus efforts.
Amid news of a new round of cuts, Carter said there is some good news for the university's financial position.
The federal stimulus package passed a few weeks ago to combat the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic will provide some relief to students and campuses, although it's unclear how.
The first tranche of a total $31.6 million in stimulus funds is designated for students in the form of financial-aid grants to assist them with coronavirus-related expenses.
It's not clear what the second set of payments to universities can specifically be used for at this time. NU is seeking further guidance from the U.S. Department of Education before the money arrives in the next 2-3 weeks, he said.
Carter said the university is also planning "several affordability initiatives" that it hopes to announce soon in an effort to make NU "even more accessible" to current and future students.
The president, who is nearing 100 days on the job, said it's his goal when the pandemic subsides for NU to be "a university system that got it right" by putting students and employees first and adapting to the "next normal" for higher education.
"Capturing those opportunities will depend on our resolve and unity now," Carter said.
By Chris Dunker

LJS: Bryan, CHI Health seeing most non-COVID-19 patients via telehealth

If you need to see a medical professional for something other than coronavirus these days, chances are you'll be doing it from the comfort of your home.
Both CHI Health and Bryan Health have worked to steer large numbers of potential patients to telehealth solutions.
CHI Health has recruited more than 450 doctors across its system in Nebraska and southwest Iowa to see patients virtually via a secure version of Zoom that is compliant with medical privacy laws, and

it's hoping to get about 350 more signed up.
The Zoom service differs from CHI Health's traditional telemedicine platform, Virtual Care. That service is more like going to an urgent care clinic: You sign up and see whatever doctor is available or designated to work in telehealth at that time.
With this new effort, patients set up videoconferencing appointments with their own doctors.
"It's a way to still connect and hopefully have our patients feel comfortable," said Cindy Lambert, a nurse practitioner with CHI Health Family Medicine in Lincoln.
Lambert offered several reasons why the system is beneficial, including providing routine care while keeping healthy people away from clinics.
"Telehealth and virtual visits allow you to make your health a priority in these challenging times," she said.
Bryan also has been steering as many patients as possible toward telehealth services.
John Woodrich, CEO of Bryan Medical Center, said the health system has been growing its telehealth network for years, but the pandemic has accelerated its use.
"It's a shame that something like this has to happen ... for people to see the value in this," he said.
Woodrich said a variety of specialties work with Bryan's telehealth network, giving patients access to a wide variety of doctors.
Cardiology is one of the specialties that's seen a big increase in telemedicine.
Because of the pandemic, Bryan Heart has been doing all of its rural clinics virtually and only seeing patients at its Lincoln clinic if it is absolutely necessary.
Dr. Matthew Johnson, an interventional cardiologist at Bryan Heart, said about 90% of patient visits are now done virtually.
Both Bryan and CHI Health continue to see patients in the office when it's necessary, but both have taken extra steps to keep healthy and sick patients separated.
At CHI Health, for example, chronically ill patients are encouraged to see their provider in the morning, and those with acute illnesses are scheduled in the afternoon. Each group uses separate entrances, waiting areas and exam rooms for visits.
Bob Ravenscroft, Bryan's vice president of advancement and chief development officer, said that when he recently had an annual checkup, his doctor's office was doing temperature checks and directing people to different entrances based on whether they had respiratory symptoms or not.
By Matt Olberding

AP: 2 largest US rivers top new listing of endangered waterways

O'FALLON, Mo. — The nation's two largest rivers top a new listing of the most endangered waterways, according to a report released Tuesday.
The Washington, D.C.-based conservation organization American Rivers released its list of the 10 most endangered rivers in the United States. The Upper Mississippi River in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Missouri was cited as the most endangered, followed by the lower Missouri River in Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri.
American Rivers, in its annual listing, cited increasingly severe flooding driven by climate change on both the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.
"Mixing poor river management with climate change has created a recipe for disaster," Bob Irvin, American Rivers' president and CEO, said in a statement. "Lives, businesses and property are at risk. It's time for our leaders to prioritize solutions that protect rivers and strengthen communities."

The Mississippi River had major flooding last year and it is flooding again, though damage this spring has been minimal. The river was 2-4 feet above flood stage Tuesday throughout much of Iowa, Illinois and Missouri, and the National Weather Service has warned of a high risk of flooding through May.

Extreme flooding has become more common along the Mississippi. For example, Hannibal, Missouri, Mark Twain's hometown, has seen seven of the 10 worst floods on record since 2000.

Meanwhile, parts of the lower Missouri River saw record and near-record flooding last spring, damaging and destroying levees, shutting down major roadways and displacing hundreds of residents. Water remained so persistently high that the Army Corps of Engineers has been unable to repair several damaged levees.

American Rivers said communities of color and economically disadvantaged places are most likely to suffer because wealthier towns are able to build higher levees that worsen flooding for those who can't.

The organization urged federal officials and leaders in Upper Mississippi River states to fund a Corps of Engineers plan aimed at better management of the river and floodplains.

For the lower Missouri River, American Rivers promoted flood protection plans that "give the river room," and urged the Corps of Engineers to prioritize flood risk reduction and habitat restoration.

Other waterways listed as among the 10 most endangered include the Big Sunflower River in Mississippi at No. 3, followed by the Puyallup River in Washington state, the South Fork Salmon River in Idaho, the Menominee River in Michigan and Wisconsin, Rapid Creek in South Dakota, Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia and Florida, the Ocklawaha River in Florida, and the Lower Youghiogheny River in Pennsylvania.

By Jim Salter

OWH Editorial: Voting by mail is soundest choice for May primary

Nebraskans will disagree on the candidates in the May 12 primary, but voters of all political stripes can agree that it makes great sense this spring to vote by mail. In the face of the coronavirus threat, filling out the ballot at home is safer than voting in person at polling places.

State and local elections officials are working hard to provide needed hygiene protections at polling places for voters and poll workers, which is simply mandatory as long as in-person voting remains an option. And Gov. Pete Ricketts insists that polls will be open on May 12.

But the surge in requests for mail-in ballots shows that many Nebraskans understand the value in casting a mail-in ballot this time around. Ballot requests so far total about 200,000, Secretary of State Robert Evnen says, which puts the state on pace for a high-turnout primary.

The word is encouraging in Douglas County, where more people have requested ballots this year than have voted in any Omaha-area primary election on record.

Given the virus emergency, Evnen took the right step in mailing every registered voter in all 93 counties an application to request a mail-in ballot. The deadline is May 1 for returning the mail-in application to the county election office.

Early voting ballots must be received by county election offices by 8 p.m. on Election Day, May 12, or they won't be counted.

The coronavirus has short-circuited countless aspects of our lives, but Nebraskans must not let it stand in the way of making their voices heard at the ballot box. Don't procrastinate. Arrange to get a mail-in ballot, and be sure to send it in on time. Energetic voter participation this spring will push

back against the virus, keeping our democracy strong and healthy.

OWH Editorial: Food Bank for the Heartland is a key force against hunger in the Midlands

The Food Bank for the Heartland has long been one of the most effective organizations battling hunger in the Midlands. The nonprofit distributes food to some 600 partner organizations across Nebraska and western Iowa. The Food Bank is struggling now to maintain its supplies due to the virus-related surge in food demand. Financial contributions are its biggest need; info at foodbankheartland.org.

OWH: Midlands Voices: Federal aid can help with local infrastructure needs

The writer is mayor of Ralston.

The latest federal efforts to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic are focusing on how to best help states and municipalities. I would urge consideration for a path that could have a dramatic impact on every community in the nation while driving economic growth and rebuilding our country's infrastructure.

If proposed stimulus legislation or other programs included help for municipalities financing or refinancing bonds, we could substantially impact the fiscal condition of American communities while stimulating the economy. It is a great solution for all municipalities.

Virtually every American city, town and village pays a portion of its budget to bonded indebtedness. These bonds are how municipalities build streets, sewers, public facilities and other infrastructure. The amount each municipality pays is impacted by the interest rate of the bonds. Lower interest rates mean lower debt payments and more money for public safety, health services and libraries.

If the federal legislation or executive action included financing or refinancing municipal debt, it would have a tremendous impact:

» Local dollars paying debt service could be shifted to pay for the critical city services that are now under threat by COVID's impact on local revenues.

» Lower interest rates would encourage cities to invest in infrastructure. Streets would be fixed. Dangerous bridges would be repaired. Water and sewer lines would be upgraded.

» Infrastructure spending would have an immediate positive impact on the economy. Local companies building streets would put people to work, creating jobs and putting money in the pockets of people who really need it.

» Subsidizing local debt is an efficient means of distributing federal assistance. It would provide valuable assistance to municipalities while allowing the federal government to recover revenues from principal and interest repayments.

Distributing COVID relief funds to address bonded indebtedness would help big cities as well as small communities. The City of Omaha is a great example. City leaders are planning to fund street construction with a $200 million bond. If Omaha could borrow or refinance bonds at a lower rate, they would create greater impact per dollar spent and put private-sector contractors to work immediately.

Smaller municipalities many times face challenges more characteristic of large cities. An example is the Ralston Arena. The arena's financial model is based on its service to the much larger population of the Omaha Metro. Ralston subsidizes any losses at the arena and pays the bonds that constructed the arena. Since COVID-19's impact on city government is primarily the loss of revenue at the arena,

the proposed distribution of funds by population would address a financial challenge which could ultimately threaten the provision of basic public services by Ralston's city government.
Our city currently pays over $1.7 million annually in interest on our debt service. If Ralston could refinance their bonds at a lower rate, the interest saved would last for years and supplement the anticipated longer-term revenue reductions that COVID will likely cause. The savings would free up dollars spent on debt that could supplement other shortfalls in city financing.
Ralston is not alone. These are thousands of municipalities across the country of fewer than 500,000 people. Some face the very same situation as Ralston with their public facilities. Others incur "big-city" debt such as street rehabilitation because they are part of large metropolitan area. Others struggle to finance water and sewer improvements.
These are unprecedented times. It is time for unprecedented actions. Addressing the "new normal" that COVID will create requires a more innovative solution than simply giving municipal grants based on population.
A stimulus package that would aid municipalities would not only solve the problem of critical services threatened by falling local tax revenues. It also could potentially have a dramatic impact on our economy and our nation's crumbling infrastructure.
By Don Groesser

OWH: Concern over outlets reopening

On behalf of the 93 member hospitals we represent, I want to voice my concern over the recent announcement that Nebraska Crossing Outlets will be reopening on April 24.
This move is in direct contradiction with public health guidelines and poses serious risks to the health of all Nebraskans. Quite simply, it's irresponsible for a non-essential retailer to open its doors to the public in the middle of a pandemic.
For the past several weeks, we've seen evidence that by practicing social distancing, working from home and making only necessary trips for food and fuel have helped us flatten the curve in our state. These efforts need to continue until we see clear evidence that the risk of COVID-19 infections have been significantly reduced and adequate testing is in place.
We need to protect our elderly citizens, people with compromised immune systems and our health care workers who are on the front lines of this public health crisis. This is not the time to take actions that could reverse the trend and nullify our efforts to this point.
Our scientists and health care professionals are working diligently to understand this disease, and we need to follow their guidance to ensure the health and safety of all Nebraskans.
Laura J. Redoutey, Lincoln
President, Nebraska Hospital Association

LJS Editorial, 4/15: How we come out of this pandemic is the real challenge

Sometimes, when we think we see a light at the end of the tunnel, there's an inclination to ease up, to breathe a sigh of relief. But you're still in a tunnel.
There may be isolated, hopeful signs the COVID-19 curve is starting to bend down in places in parts of the country.
But Nebraska and most of the nation remain in the darkness of uncertainty as we battle the coronavirus.

We've done well as a community and a country over the last four weeks.
We're being vigilant about social distancing and have avoided large gatherings enough to dramatically decrease the number of people that were originally forecast to die in this pandemic. We're flattening the curve.
It would be a shame for all of it to go to waste because we jumped the gun in assuming -- hoping -- that everything is better when the truth is we don't -- and can't -- know for sure.
Therein lies the challenge: Exterminating a highly contagious virus without completely killing our economy. But how many intense, three-week hospital stays can our health care system -- and private providers -- absorb? There are steep costs for acting too hastily and not hastily enough.
Last week's unemployment numbers show that 16.8 million Americans, including more than 67,000 in Nebraska, have lost their jobs in the last three weeks.
That's staggering. Every one of those lost jobs represents a life and family that has been impacted.
Without completely shutting down Nebraska, Gov. Pete Ricketts has put in place measures that kept us home and safe by putting shackles on businesses -- big and small -- statewide. Undeniably pro-business, Ricketts is promoting caution through his directives.
Our fidelity to them, our support of each other and support of local business are what will pull us from this situation.
We just need to know when. When will we know it's safe to come out? When will people be able to return to work? When can we take in a movie, a ballgame or grab a beer at the local tavern? And when can we get haircuts again?
Those are tricky questions regarding things we used to take for granted. Someday soon, maybe this ordeal will give us a new appreciation for those overlooked freedoms.
We're much wiser than we were weeks ago, but we still haven't contained the virus here or anywhere. The data will tell us when we have. In the meantime, we can't act too rashly and risk another outbreak.
When Nebraska and the nation reopen for business is as much about personal responsibility as it is public policy. Let's all do our part, because we're still very much in a tunnel and very much in the dark.

LJS Local View: A tale of two crises

Action vs. Inaction. Proactive vs. Reactive. Managing Risk vs. Managing a Crisis.
These concepts were central to my professional career as a drought management specialist and climate scientist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
Promoting these concepts to improve drought management domestically and globally served as motivation for creating the National Drought Mitigation Center in 1995.
Convincing scientists and policy makers in states, foreign governments and international organizations of the intrinsic value of preparing for drought has always been the principal challenge.
Given that drought is a recurring feature of the climate in most countries, logic tell us that all governments should be proactive and plan for the next drought. This approach replaces the traditional strategy of managing a crisis, which is typically poorly coordinated, ineffective and untimely.
A more proactive approach requires putting preparedness plans, actions and programs in place in advance of drought that reduce the risks associated with drought and, therefore, its impacts. Having a preparedness plan leads to improved coordination within and between levels of government and a

more effective and timely response.

When confronted with a crisis, the costs of inaction (lack of preparedness) are always far higher than the costs of action (preparedness).

Perhaps, never before has the lack of preparedness for a crisis been more apparent than what we are experiencing in 2020 in our attempt to respond domestically and globally to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The economic, social and environmental costs of this pandemic will be astronomical, and recovery will be long and painful. Despite warnings by public health officials, infectious disease experts and some politicians both domestically and globally, we failed to take these warnings seriously and prepare for the inevitable — the next pandemic.

As President Obama stated in 2014 when requesting supplemental funding from Congress to deal with the Ebola crisis, “There may and will likely come a time when we have an airborne disease that is deadly. In order to deal with that effectively, we have to put in place an infrastructure, not just here at home but globally, that allows us to see it quickly, isolate it quickly (and) respond to it quickly. ... It’s about the safety and security of the American people.” Instead, we denied this threat and were not prepared to respond quickly to this pandemic.

Of course, there are numerous parallels between the COVID-19 pandemic and the current and looming climate crisis, which many continue to deny. For decades, scientists have warned about the threat of climate change, but these warnings have been ignored. Moreover, experts warn that pandemics like COVID-19 will become more frequent as changes in our climate become more pronounced.

In addition, the threats associated with climate change are far greater than what we are now experiencing with COVID-19. The climate crisis requires urgent action on the part of all nations. We must act globally and stop ignoring the warnings of scientists — warnings that have become more ominous in the past two years.

The economic, social and environmental costs of inaction will be staggering, and those most affected will again be the same people and nations that are the most vulnerable to COVID-19. As Alden Meyer, director of strategy and policy for the Union of Concerned Scientists stated in November 2019, "We are sleepwalking toward a climate catastrophe and need to wake up and take urgent action” (New York Times, Nov. 26).

We must improve our preparation for the next crisis by taking action now, whether it is a pandemic from an infectious disease or climate change. We can do better. We must do better. With climate change, there will be no second chance — there is no planet B.

However, in order to do better, we must aggressively pursue appropriate actions by developing and implementing policies, plans and infrastructure domestically and globally that facilitates adaptation to the changes in climate we are experiencing. We must reduce greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate as much future warming as possible.

A protestor at a recent rally carried a sign that said, "Every disaster movie begins with the government ignoring a scientist." Although we are currently unable to go to a movie theater to watch a movie, the message is clear.

To be ready for the next crisis, we must take action now. We must believe the scientists. Action leads to hope for children, our grandchildren, planet and us.

Donald Wilhite is the founding director of the National Drought Mitigation Center and professor and director emeritus for the School of Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is also a member of the Nebraska Elder Climate Legacy group.

LJS: Cost of inaction will be clear

Despite the cover that Dr. Anthony Fauci provided Gov. Pete Ricketts' woefully inadequate response to the metastasizing coronavirus outbreak, the desperate reality of widespread mortality will become clear over the coming weeks here in our justifiably proud state of Nebraska.
On average, deaths from coronavirus infection do not occur until four weeks subsequent to infection, and because individuals can transmit the virus before they become symptomatic, all evidence indicates that we have a nascent outbreak fueled by asymptomatic individuals taking place in Lancaster County and across the state, the disastrous scope of which will far exceed the capacity of our heroic health care providers to contain.
Governor Ricketts' delay in locking down the state will sadly have inestimable consequences over the ensuing month, and all the justified criticism that will ensue will do nothing to ameliorate the suffering of the individuals that will needlessly suffer as a result of the governor's callous recklessness.
Neil Rutledge, Lincoln

Sioux City Journal: LETTER: 'What could possibly be the reason ...?'

Acommon sense approach concludes that if Governors Kim Reynolds, Kristi Noem and Pete Ricketts would have put a stay-at-home order in place, the chances our police chief and other police department staff members being infected could have decreased. With that great team effort of the aforementioned trifecta, MercyOne, UnityPoint, SCPD and SCFD employees' chances of being infected potentially increase.
What could possibly be the reason we would unnecessarily expose our first responders and first line of defense to this illness? If it don't make dollars, it don't make sense.
David Roberts, Sioux City

AP: States developing plans to ease lockdowns

WASHINGTON (AP) — Setting the stage for a possible power struggle with President Donald Trump, governors around the U.S. began sketching out plans Tuesday to reopen their economies in a slow and methodical process designed to prevent the coronavirus from rebounding with tragic consequences.
In Italy, Spain and other places around Europe where infections and deaths have begun stabilizing, the process is already underway, with certain businesses and industries allowed to start back up in a calibrated effort by politicians to balance public health against the nations' economic well-being.
Trump announced a halt of U.S. payments to the World Health Organization pending a review of its warnings about the coronavirus and China. Trump, whose own response to the virus has been called into question, criticized the WHO for not sounding the alarm sooner. He asserted that the virus could have been contained at its source and lives could have been spared had the U.N. health agency done a better job investigating reports coming out of China.
While the crisis is far from over in the U.S., with more than 25,000 dead and about 600,000 confirmed infections by Johns Hopkins University's count, the dire scenarios forecast just two weeks ago have not come to pass, raising hopes from coast to coast.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who has joined a coalition with his counterparts in Oregon and Washington on how to emerge from the crisis, outlined a set of conditions for lifting restrictions in America's most populous state. Among other things, he said, hospitalizations must decline and more testing must become available.

When the state does reopen, he warned, things will not look the same. Waiters will probably wear masks and gloves, schools may stagger students' arrival times to reduce crowding, and large gatherings such as sporting events and concerts are "not in the cards," the Democrat said.

A similar coalition has taken shape in the Northeast, encompassing Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island.

"The house is still on fire," New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said. "We still have to put the fire out" but also "make sure this doesn't reignite."

Politicians and public health authorities warned that easing restrictions in the U.S. and Europe must be accompanied by widespread antibody testing to see who might be immune along with ramped-up tracing of infected people's contacts. That could entail the use of smartphone technology.

While the president has issued national social-distancing guidelines advising people to stay home, it has been governors and local leaders who have instituted the tough, mandatory restrictions, such as lockdowns and the closing of schools and nonessential businesses.

The effects of such measures around the globe were made plain by the International Monetary Fund, which projected that the world economy will suffer its worst year since the Great Depression in the 1930s, shrinking by an estimated 3%.

Still, there were glimmers of hope, even in New York, where the death toll topped 10,800. Cuomo reported 778 deaths over the previous 24 hours but said fatalities were leveling off, and hospitalizations and the number of new patients put on ventilators were continuing to drop, suggesting that social distancing is working.

At the same time, he warned against complacency: "We could lose all the progress we made in one week if we do it wrong."

Other governors echoed that sentiment.

"We've got to make sure that we avoid a second wave at all costs," Michigan's Gretchen Whitmer said. "We're going to make decisions based on science and having a real strategic phase-in of our economy when it's appropriate and safe to do so."

Adding caution from the White House, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious-disease expert, told the Associated Press that the U.S. still lacks the testing and tracing procedures needed to begin reopening the economy.

"We have to have something in place that is efficient and that we can rely on," he said, "and we're not there yet."

Any relaxation of social distancing would have to occur on a "rolling" basis, not all at once, he said, reflecting the ways COVID-19 struck different areas at different times.

Fauci also said a vaccine might be possible by mid to late winter, a slightly more optimistic outlook than his previous estimate of 12 to 18 months. "Please, let me say this caveat: That is assuming that it's effective. See, that's the big 'if,'" he said. "It's got to be effective, and it's got to be safe."

Dr. Anne Schuchat, who oversees coronavirus response at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said the CDC has been working with federal officials to develop a detailed reopening plan, including determining what measures must be tracked and what conditions must be met. The plans, which remain under review, include separate steps for schools, businesses and other entities, Schuchat said.

In New York, Queens social worker Brandy Robinson said deaths would have to come down "for me to feel safe to get back on the train or do anything."
"It's very hard to come out of the house at all," said Robinson, 34. "I just try to keep the faith and hope that this will pass soon."
Some experts say states will need to train thousands of workers in contact tracing. Public health agencies from Massachusetts to San Francisco have gone on a hiring binge.
In other developments, India extended the world's largest lockdown on its 1.3 billion people until May 3, and police with batons charged hundreds of jobless migrant workers who crowded a Mumbai railroad station to demand special trains to take them to their home villages.
In Britain, with a death toll put at more than 12,000, new data showed that the true number is hundreds higher. And China faced a flare-up along its remote northern border with Russia.
In Italy — which has seen more than 21,000 deaths but on Tuesday reported the smallest number of new infections in a month — bookstores, stationery stores and shops selling baby supplies were allowed to open in many places. Forestry workers, needed to clear dead trees ahead of the summer fire season, also went back.
In Spain, where more than 18,000 have died, workers returned to some factory and construction jobs this week, while stores and offices remained closed. Hardware and gardening stores reopened in Austria, but Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said he stands ready to "pull the emergency brake" if there's a resurgence.
Worldwide, about 2 million confirmed infections have been reported and more than 120,000 people have died, according to Johns Hopkins. The figures are believed to understate the true size of the pandemic, because of limited testing, uneven counting of the dead and concealment by some governments.

OWH: Iowa sees highest daily coronavirus count yet as outbreak spreads at Tyson pork plant

Iowa officials reported 189 new coronavirus cases Tuesday, the highest daily count yet, and six additional deaths.
Eighty-six of those new cases are tied to an outbreak at a Tyson Foods pork processing plant in Columbus Junction, Iowa, near the Iowa-Illinois border. A total of 166 workers there have tested positive so far, Gov. Kim Reynolds said, as Iowa health officials and plant managers try to test more employees to contain the flare-up.
The plant temporarily suspended operations last week and will continue to stay closed until at least next week, Reynolds said at a press briefing.
Iowa had 1,899 confirmed cases as of Tuesday, with 17,467 people testing negative, for a positive rate of just under 10%. The state's recovery rate so far is 42%, and 49 people have died.
Pottawattamie County has reported 14 coronavirus cases, including one death, an older woman from Council Bluffs.
Workers at several Nebraska meat or food plants have tested positive, including at a JBS USA beef plant and a McCain Foods frozen appetizer facility in Grand Island, a Western Reserve beef processing facility in Hastings and a Costco chicken plant in Fremont.
The latest Iowa data suggests that some communities have been hit harder than others. While Latinos and Hispanics make up only 6% of the population, they account for 16.4% of confirmed cases. African Americans, who make up about 4% of the state's population, account for 8.7% of

Iowa's cases.

The coronavirus crisis shows why it's critical to support local journalism

Tyson last week temporarily suspended production at the plant after acknowledging that more than two dozen of its 1,400 workers had the virus. The company said Monday that the temporary closure would continue this week.

Reynolds said the state made more tests available to Tyson employees as part of a plan to understand the scope of the outbreak and get the plant reopened. The governor praised Tyson's handling of the situation and said the company, not the state, would decide when it's safe to resume production.

"They have really been very proactive in making sure that when they stand the plant back up, they are doing everything they can not just to protect the employees but to continue a really critical part of our food supply chain," Reynolds said.

Fueled by the Tyson outbreak, more than 1% of the 11,000 residents of rural Louisa County, the highest percentage in the state, have tested positive for the coronavirus. But local officials said they have the situation under control.

"Things are fine here in Columbus Junction," Mayor Mark Huston said. "It would be nice to get the economy going again because the streets are pretty quiet."

Reynolds said state officials were assisting other companies with reported cases. The Iowa Premium beef plant in Tama closed this week after several of its 850 employees tested positive.

The governor also confirmed that the number of long-term-care facilities with outbreaks has doubled to six since last week.

By Erin Duffy

Tuesday, April 14, 2020

TV and Radio

KMTV: OPPD, Governor warn against utility scams

NET: Senators: Reopen Businesses To Help Economy And Promote "Herd Immunity"

KMTV: Nebraska state senators say cure is worse than the disease

Public News Service: Social Distancing Not an Option in Nebraska's Overcrowded Prisons

NTV: University of Nebraska system still waiting on more details of COVID-19 plan

NCN: Greeley care home workers now a month into self-quarantine

KETV: Disability groups concerned about who will get ventilators and treatment if shortages occur

NCN: Local food banks struggle to keep up with increasing demand during pandemic

NET: Nebraska To Get More Fed. Stimulus Money Per COVID-19 Case Than Most Other States

NCN: Virus spread in Grand Island could force hospitals to transfer patients

Governor

OWH: Ricketts dismisses calls from two Nebraska state senators to lift coronavirus restrictions

LJS: Two state senators urge an end to coronavirus restrictions; Ricketts said he'll stick with gradual approach

AP: Ricketts rejects senators' call to resume normal activities

AP: Gov. Ricketts expands some virus restrictions statewide

OWH: Hard-hit states blast distribution of first round of relief money that favored Nebraska, others

CNN: 7 governors still haven't issued stay-at-home orders. Here's why.
Washington Times: Only 2% of total coronavirus cases are in states without stay-at-home orders
GII: UPDATE: Mayor says normal life won't return in Grand Island for some time
KSNB: Central District Health says positive testing rate at 20-25% for the district
OWH: 'Our resources are being tested': Grand Island hospital's ICU is filling up fast
OWH: Nebraska State legislatures' COVID-19 bills: arranging emergency funds, declaring a March Madness champ
OWH: 10 workers at Hastings meatpacking plant, 1 worker at Fremont chicken plant have COVID-19
LJS: Divided Lincoln City Council votes to meet virtually over city attorney's legal concerns
KLKN: Food Bank of Lincoln expects tens of thousands to be food insecure in coming months
WJAG: Amount of food insecure people in Nebraska increasing
Daily Beast: Nebraskans in Virus Hot Zone 'Terrified' After Governor Rejects Stay-at-Home Order

Coronavirus
LJS: Nebraska gets $378K per coronavirus patient in federal grants vs. New York's $12K, analysis shows
OWH: Nebraska reports 18th death from coronavirus; cases jump in Grand Island area
OWH: Coronavirus exposure possible in Atkinson after Red Cross blood drive worker tests positive
KNEB: Local Officials: New Rapid COVID-19 Tests May Take Time to be Available in Panhandle
LJS: Some meatpacking plants hit hard by COVID-19, others virtually unscathed
LJS: Health director: Lincoln residents' actions have likely held down coronavirus cases

State, Local and Regional
LJS: Report: Nebraska lost $63 million in March because of COVID-19
LJS: Nebraska livestock auctions strive to keep supply of meat moving
AP: Feds: Online drug dealer planned to bomb Nebraska pharmacy

Opinion
OWH Editorial: Packing plants are at threat from virus; all precautions are needed
OWH Midlands Voices: Let's nurture and promote Nebraska's economic innovation
OWH Public Pulse

19. Support local restaurants
20. Child care needs
21. Have compassion for mother
22. Rancher's praise for Sasse
23. Yes, it's 17,000
24. Buffett can help Doorly Zoo

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LJS Letters

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12. Nebraska should end hypocrisy

GII: Wrong approach taken against the coronavirus

National/Federal
AP: As nations talk of reopening, health officials fear flare-ups
AP: Sailor dies of virus; a spit test shows promise; 50th state has a death

AP: Coronavirus relief starts to flow to small businesses; more than 941,000 loans OK'd so far

OWH: Ricketts dismisses calls from two Nebraska state senators to lift coronavirus restrictions

LINCOLN — Gov. Pete Ricketts on Monday rejected calls from two state senators to lift restrictions designed to slow the spread of the coronavirus, and he later disputed a characterization of the virus's impact as "a nothing burger."

"You can just look at New York City. It's a real thing," Ricketts told a caller on his monthly radio call-in show.

One of the state's authorities on pandemics added that the social distancing steps taken by Nebraskans, while a hardship, have reduced the projected death toll here.

"Thanks to the sacrifice of Nebraskans, we can likely reopen safer and sooner than many in the rest of the country," said Dr. Ali Khan, dean of the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

In a weekend commentary published by the Hastings Tribune, State Sens. Steve Halloran of Hastings and Steve Erdman of Bayard argued that the dangers of the coronavirus have been overblown and that the best, and fastest, way to defeat the virus is to let people become infected and build up "herd immunity."

Herd immunity develops when enough people in a community, about 80%, come in contact with the virus and develop antibodies, thus limiting the number of people who can spread it to at-risk individuals. The virus could be defeated in four weeks, the senators said.

"All life is sacred and valuable, but Nebraskans also need to re-open their businesses, go back to work, go back to school, and get the elective surgeries they need," the senators wrote.

But when asked about the commentary Monday, Ricketts said that herd immunity really isn't a plan and that allowing schools to reopen and the virus to spread unchecked would quickly overwhelm the state's hospitals.

The explosion of cases in the Grand Island area, he said, is an example of how quickly the virus can spread — a week ago, the local hospital needed only four or five of its intensive care unit beds for COVID-19 patients; now, 14 of the unit's 16 beds are occupied, and the local health director is worried that Grand Island's health care system will be overwhelmed.

The goal of social distancing and staying home, Ricketts said, is to slow the spread of the virus so there's not a dramatic surge of cases that swamp hospitals.

"I think the senators would agree: We don't want to overwhelm the health care system in our state," the governor said at his daily coronavirus press briefing.

"We're trying to avoid that happening here," he said later on his radio call-in show, "so that anyone who needs a hospital room, that ICU room or a ventilator can get it in Nebraska."

Khan said infecting 80% of the U.S. population with COVID-19 would have led to hundreds of thousands of deaths.

The disease is not limited to the elderly, he said, or those with chronic illnesses. About 55% of those who are hospitalized are under 65, Khan said, and 20% of those who die are under that age.

The caller to the radio show said one of the most recent projections of deaths from COVID-19 in Nebraska is 281 by Aug. 4. That would be fewer deaths than those from cancer or heart disease (about 3,500 each in 2017), and yet the government doesn't ban smoking or "regulate our diet," the caller said. Even deaths from flu and pneumonia were higher, at 393, during 2017, he said.

“You’re strangling the economy. And for what?” the caller asked.
But Ricketts said the main difference between flu and the coronavirus is that so much is unknown. He noted that in January, the World Health Organization and China were saying it couldn’t be transmitted from person to person, which proved untrue.
One thing that is known is that it is “very transmittable” and can be spread by someone who doesn’t show any of the symptoms, such as a fever and a dry cough.
Khan said critics have a point: The nation could have attacked the outbreak “much better” with earlier testing of cases and isolation, better protection of high-risk groups and health care workers, and adequate treatment capacity at hot spots.
“But we had not the imagination, testing, public health workforce, PPE or equipment for the job,” he said.
Ricketts said that he’s always reevaluating the data but that the goal is to “strike a balance” between encouraging people to continue working yet urging them to stay home to avoid spreading the virus.
The governor added that he “100% agreed” with Halloran and Erdman that he wants to reopen the state as quickly as possible.
The herd immunity idea has been advanced by Dr. Knut Wittkowski, a former biostatistician at Rockefeller University in New York City. He has argued that “flattening the curve,” as social distancing is designed to do, only prolongs the inevitable spread of the virus through the population.
On Monday, Rockefeller said Wittkowski’s views do not represent the views of the university, its leadership or its faculty.
The two senators said a better approach would be to allow less vulnerable groups, like school kids, to get COVID-19 so they can build up mass immunity. Rather than “lockdowns,” they said the state should allow school and work to continue, while isolating only those people most at risk, banning large gatherings and focusing on hot spots.
Both Halloran, 71, and Erdman, 70, are among the at-risk population. In their essay, the two Republicans in the officially nonpartisan Legislature predicted that “civil unrest” is inevitable.
“We cannot afford to go another day with this current, failed policy,” they wrote. “You may not agree with our analysis, but we believe this is the conversation we should now be having.”
Ricketts sidestepped a question about whether such commentary undercuts his efforts to encourage Nebraskans to remain vigilant with social distancing.
In other developments Monday:

- The governor highlighted the impact on the state’s food pantries during his daily briefing.

Scott Young of the Food Bank of Lincoln said “food insecurity” is expected to increase by 45% because of the joblessness caused by the coronavirus crisis. That would translate to 100,000 more people in the state needing assistance.
At the same time, Young said, sources of excess food are drying up. Grocery stores are selling out, leaving less to be donated to food banks, he said, and purchases of food by his organization are being delayed by logistical problems. At a drive-thru food distribution site in Grand Island over the weekend, 1,000 people showed up for 750 prepacked food bags, Young said.
“It’s rough right now, and we anticipate it’s only going to get rougher,” he said.
Donations can be made at foodbankheartland.org or lincolnfoodbank.org.

- Ricketts said that unemployment insurance checks are typically delivered within 21 to 28 days and that the state is trying to maintain that standard amid a deluge of new requests for assistance.
- Guidance from Washington, D.C., on when to relax restrictions will be among “a wide net” of advice Nebraska will consider before taking such steps, the governor said. He said he

would talk to local health officials and the state's chief medical officer and would look at what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests and what's happening in other states before making that decision.

- Ricketts commended the staff at a Greeley, Nebraska, nursing home, who have been living at the facility to avoid contact with the coronavirus.

By Paul Hammel and Martha Stoddard

LJS: Two state senators urge an end to coronavirus restrictions; Ricketts said he'll stick with gradual approach

Two state senators have called for a return to normalcy in Nebraska by reengaging social contact and business activity in spite of the coronavirus, suggesting that otherwise "civil unrest will eventually ensue" in the state.

"We cannot afford to go another day with this current failed policy," Sens. Steve Halloran of Hastings and Steve Erdman of Bayard wrote in an op-ed published in the Hastings Tribune.

Halloran and Erdman said they were responding largely to messages they have received stating that "if these restrictions continue, my business will close and never reopen."

The two senators said that "herd immunity" to the new virus can be achieved by allowing healthy Americans who are less vulnerable to "interact with the disease" while protecting vulnerable Americans who might not be able to survive exposure to the virus.

That comports with a strategy promoted by Dr. Knut Wittkowski, who is a senior research associate at Rockefeller University in New York City, they said.

Asked during his daily coronavirus news briefing about the proposal voiced by the two senators, Gov. Pete Ricketts said that he will remain focused on attempting to "make sure we don't overwhelm the health care system" while moving to lift current restrictions "gradually, over time."

Ricketts said he wants to "open up as quickly as possible," but to do so cautiously and prudently.

An hour later on his monthly call-in radio program, the governor was confronted by a caller who argued that "you're strangling the economy" for what will prove to be "a nothing-burger."

"People are losing their jobs every day," the caller said. "They're losing their businesses, losing their savings."

Less than 300 people are projected to die in Nebraska from the coronavirus, the caller said. More will die from pneumonia and the flu, he said.

"One of the key differences," Ricketts responded, "is the unknown" and the fact that the coronavirus can spread very quickly and could threaten to overwhelm the health care system.

"There are a lot of unknowns," he said.

Actions that he and the state have taken have slowed the spread of the virus, Ricketts said. They include adopting rules of physical separation, closing schools and limiting restaurants to pick-up, drive-thru and delivery service while allowing bars to only provide off-sale purchases.

Gatherings have been limited to no more than 10 people across the state and individuals have been asked to maintain 6 feet of separation from other people.

People have been urged, but not required, to work from home.

"The virus in the state has been slowed down," Ricketts said during his radio broadcast.

Asked if he or any members of his cabinet have been tested for the virus, the governor said no. None of them has been symptomatic or is considered to be high-risk, he said.

Ricketts pointed to Grand Island for an example of how swiftly the virus can spread, especially in "a very challenging environment" such as meatpacking plants, where workers labor on production lines

virtually shoulder-to-shoulder.
The state recorded its 18th coronavirus-linked death Monday, a Washington County man in his 90s with underlying health issues.
The total number of confirmed cases grew to 871, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services.
Scott Young, executive director of the Food Bank of Lincoln, told the governor's briefing that job losses and other fallout from the coronavirus outbreak will sharply increase the number of people needing assistance at a time when grocery stores are selling nearly all their products with less available to donate.
"Resources are going down while the need is going up," he said.
"It's rough right now," Young said, "and we anticipate it will get rougher."
In their op-ed, Halloran and Erdman wrote: "We regret that fear and panic have directed our policies in the past, but a fundamental change is now needed in how we deal with the coronavirus.
"There is a way back to normalcy, but it does not include waiting for a vaccine, shutting down schools and businesses and doling out another stimulus package.
"The lockdowns have devastated our economy, set our students back and made the cure worse than the disease," Halloran and Erdman wrote.
"By keeping schools, hospitals and businesses open, but separating the elderly and those with certain medical conditions, herd immunity can be achieved and the coronavirus defeated in about four weeks."
Halloran and Erdman are Republican members of the nonpartisan Legislature and their comments appeared to be sharply critical of the policies pursued by Ricketts, also a Republican, although they did not criticize the governor personally.
By Don Walton

AP: Ricketts rejects senators' call to resume normal activities

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Gov. Pete Ricketts on Monday rejected a call from two state lawmakers to resume normal school and business activities in Nebraska right away, saying that could lead to a surge in new cases that might overwhelm the state's hospitals.
Ricketts said he will stick with the state's current plan, which includes statewide school closures and restrictions on businesses and social gatherings until at least April 30.
His remarks at his daily coronavirus press briefing came in response to a question about a newspaper column by state Sens. Steve Halloran and Steve Erdman, both conservatives who normally agree with the Republican governor.
The senators argued that shelter-in-place orders across the U.S. have devastated the economy, put students at a disadvantage and "made the cure worse than the disease."
The senators contend that lifting the restrictions and allowing healthy people to contract the virus would create a "herd immunity" that would protect society as a whole. Epidemiologists and other public health experts say that approach would lead to a surge in coronavirus cases and deaths, and social distancing is the only way to protect people who are most at risk.
"If Nebraska continues to operate within its current mitigation policy, civil unrest will eventually ensue," wrote the senators, who are both in their 70s, a high-risk age group. "All life is sacred and valuable, but Nebraskans also need to re-open their businesses, go back to work, go back to school and get the elective surgeries they need."

Ricketts said he agrees with the senators "100%" about the need to reopen schools and businesses as soon as possible, but he warned that doing so too soon could lead to a spike in cases.
"The big key, again, is what we have said all along, which is about being sure we don't overwhelm the health care system," he said. "That's what we're working to manage to. We've got to stay home and stay healthy until the end of April."
Nebraska had 871 confirmed coronavirus cases and 17 deaths as of Monday evening, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services. Nearly 10,500 people have tested negative.
The number of new cases also declined to 59 on Monday, down from a sharp increase of 101 new cases on Sunday. On Saturday, the state had 58 new cases.
For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough 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, including pneumonia, and death.
The governor made his comments as a local public health district reported 10 new cases among workers at a beef processing facility in Hastings, in Halloran's district.
Ricketts also issued a call to help local food banks, which face increasing demand as more people lose jobs and food shortages as more grocery stores sell out of key products.
"It's rough right now, and we anticipate it's going to get rougher over the coming months," said Scott Young, executive director of the Food Bank of Lincoln.
Meanwhile, police in Omaha handed out 20 citations for trespassing in city parks over the weekend, just days after the mayor ordered the parks closed amid complaints they were too crowded.
The tickets were issued Saturday and Sunday, with the largest share — eight citations — being handed out in northeastern Omaha's Hummel Park, police said. Two people also were cited on the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge that links Omaha to Council Bluffs, Iowa, over the Missouri River.
The others were handed out in Adams, Levi Carter, Miller, Memorial and Robert's parks, police said.
By Grant Schulte and Margery A. Beck

AP: Gov. Ricketts expands some virus restrictions statewide

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts ordered the closure Thursday of all salons, tattoo parlors and strip clubs until April 30 and announced the cancellation of organized group sports until May 31, expanding an order that was already in place in the state's biggest cities.
Ricketts said the executive order was intended to bring consistency to a patchwork of mandates from local public health departments. Salons in Omaha, Lincoln and many surrounding communities have been closed since late last month, but some of those businesses had been allowed to remain open in other parts of the state.
Ricketts, a Republican, tried to use persuasion and regional restrictions to contain the spread of the coronavirus until last week, when he imposed enforceable statewide limits on social gatherings.
Nebraska is one of a small handful of holdout states that haven't issued formal stay-at-home orders, although Ricketts has argued that many of the state's restrictions are similar to what's in place elsewhere.
Ricketts on Thursday also issued a non-enforceable proclamation, calling on residents to stay at home unless necessary, maintain a safe physical distance at work and only shop once a week, with one person per family. It also asks residents to keep children away from playgrounds and group sports, help seniors and exercise daily at home.
"This is about asking Nebraskans to do what's right," Ricketts said at his daily coronavirus news

conference. He said that if Nebraskans can adhere to the recommendations for 21 days, "we should really be able to take a whack at the virus."
Ricketts said he's confident that most residents "want to do the right thing" to keep the virus from spreading and overwhelming the state's hospitals.
On Wednesday, Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert ordered all of the city's parks closed through April 30 amid complaints they were too crowded and visitors weren't following social-distancing rules to keep the virus from spreading. Stothert said the worst offenders were youth sports coaches and parents with children.
"What we saw this weekend was a lot of a lack of compliance," she said.
On Tuesday, a gathering of about 100 people in Omaha's Benson Park for a barbecue ended in a fatal shooting.
Ricketts' announcement came as state health officials reported another coronavirus death in Nebraska, bringing the state's total number of COVID-19 deaths to 14.
The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported late Wednesday that the latest death was that of a man in his 70s in northeastern Nebraska's Madison County. The man had several underlying health conditions, health officials said. As of Thursday morning, the state had reported 523 cases of the virus, with more than 7,500 residents testing negative.
For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough 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, including pneumonia, and death.
Ricketts also pushed back Thursday against the state public employee union's request to allow all state employees to work from home if they're able.
"Our members understand the critical importance of the work they do, and that's why they must be protected," said Deb Studl, a state child and family services worker. "If we aren't kept safe, there will be no one left to provide essential services to the most vulnerable Nebraskans
Ricketts said individual workers who can believe they can do their job from home should make the case to their managers. But he argued that for some employees, doing so isn't possible.
"We have to continue to provide essential services," he said. "We all know that every organization in the state is going through challenging times. Everyone is trying to figure out how to work from home. We're all in this together and we must be mindful of this."
By Grant Schulte and Margery A. Beck

OWH: Hard-hit states blast distribution of first round of relief money that favored Nebraska, others

LINCOLN — Hospital executives and political leaders in hard-hit states have blasted the distribution of federal health care relief money for favoring Nebraska and other states with fewer cases of COVID-19.
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo tweeted on Sunday that states "like Montana and Nebraska" were in line to get more than $300,000 for every reported case of the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, while New York was getting about $12,000 per case.
"We need a fair federal stimulus bill that is distributed by need," he said.
The furor arose after federal officials announced plans to divvy up the first $30 billion in emergency grants based on the historical share of Medicare payments to hospitals, doctors and other providers. Critics said the money should be targeted instead to areas with the largest numbers of coronavirus

cases. Nebraska ranks 42nd in the number of cases per capita, according to the New York Times. When asked for his response, Gov. Pete Ricketts said Nebraska was not involved with the distribution decisions, which were made at the federal level.

But he said New York has been a priority for getting personal protective equipment and testing equipment and that state “is getting a lot of attention and is getting a lot of resources” through the federal government and other avenues.

The federal CARES Act authorized $100 billion in emergency grants to health care providers. The $30 billion in question represents the first distribution of funds from the total.

A federal Health and Human Services spokesperson told The World-Herald on Monday that giving out grants based on Medicare revenue “allowed us to make initial payments to providers as quickly as possible.”

The agency said plans are to focus the next round of grants to providers in areas “particularly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak,” as well as those with lower shares of Medicare revenues, including children’s hospitals, pediatricians and Medicaid providers.

Under the CARES Act, the $100 billion relief package was “to prevent, prepare for and respond to coronavirus,” including paying for protective equipment, testing supplies, extra employees and temporary shelters and other measures to deal with the potentially deadly epidemic.

The money also will help health care providers that have lost regular sources of revenue, as elective surgeries have been banned across the country and in-person office visits have been sharply curtailed.

The concerns come as states have been competing for protective equipment, ventilators and other needed supplies.

By Martha Stoddard

CNN: 7 governors still haven't issued stay-at-home orders. Here's why.

(CNN)Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson is one of seven governors -- all Republicans -- who have yet to issue a stay-at-home order to his citizens as a way to limit the spread of coronavirus nationwide.

"We want to take the long-term approach to this and you're not going to win simply by a lockdown," Hutchinson explained to CNN's Jake Tapper on Sunday, adding: "There's a lot of hope and optimism this Easter that our tough time is behind and we're going to be getting better."

According to CNN's tracking, just under 1,400 Arkansans have been diagnosed with the coronavirus, with 29 deaths. The state will reach its peak -- in terms of deaths from coronavirus -- on April 30, according to a projection by the Institute for Medical and Health Evaluation at the University of Washington School of Medicine.

Given that 97% of the country's population is currently under stay-at-home restrictions and the guidance from infectious disease experts -- including the US surgeon general -- to continue policies of social distancing, Hutchinson and his six other Republican colleagues are very much an exception to the rule.

"I don't understand why that's not happening," Dr. Anthony Fauci said earlier this month of the lack of stay-at-home orders in every state.

To that end, they've been asked regularly about their decision (or lack thereof). With the help of my producer Alli Gordon, here's what each of them have said of late about their thinking when it comes to stay-at-home orders.

• Iowa (1,587 cases, 41 deaths; projected death peak: May 2): "It would be irresponsible for me to

just do a statewide [shelter-in-place order] when, according to Dr. Fauci, many of the mitigation efforts that I have put in place are actually aligned with the results that they're trying to get." -- Gov. Kim Reynolds

• Nebraska (814 cases, 17 deaths; projected death peak: May 2): Last Thursday, Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts ordered that all hair salons, tattoo parlors and strip clubs be closed through May 31. And on Friday he issued a directive that urged social distancing practices to stay in place; "We're calling on people to exercise their freedom to do the right thing, that individual responsibility, that civic duty, to do the right thing here in our state," Ricketts said. He noted that his directive was not a stay-at-home order: "This is not that kind of thing, this is about asking Nebraskans to do what's right," Ricketts said.

• North Dakota (308 cases, 8 deaths; projected death peak: April 30): There is an active online petition -- signed by 2,800 people -- to try to force Gov. Doug Burgum to issue a stay-at-home order. But Burgum doesn't seem to be reconsidering. "We get to listen to people who think we've locked down too much and people who think we need to lock down more but we would invite those people that signed that petition to really dig into the numbers with us," he said last week. "I mean we moved early and fast on a number of restrictions that is producing this low positive rate today and we moved fast on increasing our testing."

• South Dakota (730 cases, 6 deaths; projected death peak: May 1): In pledging not to issue a stay-at-home order, Gov. Kristi Noem said this: "I have all the faith in the world of the people of South Dakota," Noem says. "They've been absolute rock stars in working to protect their communities and their families." The South Dakota Medical Association sent Noem a letter last week asking her to issue a stay-at-home order but there's no indication she has any plans to reverse course.

• Utah (2,303 cases, 18 deaths; projected death peak: April 29): Gov. Gary Herbert issued a "Stay Home, Stay Safe" directive on March 27 -- and extended it through May 1 last Friday. Utah House Democrats have pushed Herbert to go further, using a statement last week to "send a stronger, clearer message to every person in the state about the severe threat of COVID-19 to our health, our welfare, and our economic well-being" by issuing a stay-at-home order.

• Wyoming (270 cases, 0 deaths; projected death peak: May 2): Last week, the Wyoming Medical Association sent a letter to Gov. Mark Gordon calling on him to issue a stay-at-home order "before it was too late." Gordon has issued some self-quarantine restrictions for people visiting Wyoming but has largely left local government enforce the order (or not). "If you're waiting for me to issue a shelter-in-place order... what are you waiting for?" Gordon said earlier this month. "Are you waiting for, 'mother may I?' Or are you taking care of yourself and practicing the common sense that we expect? One of our Wyoming values is 'talk less, say more'. Our orders talk less and say more."

None of these states are in the top 10 in terms of cases or deaths. Or even close. But given what we know about asymptomatic transmission, the lack of her immunity and a year (or more) expected until a vaccine exists, there's no question that these governors are taking a calculated risk in their actions (or inaction) on dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

By Chris Cillizza

Washington Times: Only 2% of total coronavirus cases are in states without stay-at-home orders

The eight states without comprehensive stay-at-home orders for all residents make up less than 2% of the total coronavirus cases and deaths reported nationwide, data show.

As of Monday, the governors of Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming had not issued statewide stay-at-home orders, according to the states' official websites and a New York Times analysis. All 50 states, however, call for social distancing practices. The eight states recorded more than 9,700 coronavirus cases and 210 deaths as of Monday, state health departments reported.

Across the U.S., the coronavirus has sickened more than 560,800 and killed more than 22,900, according to a Johns Hopkins University COVID-19 tracker. That means the eight states account for 1.7% of all coronavirus cases and 0.9% of deaths reported in the U.S.

U.S. Census Bureau data from 2018 show that the eight states make up about 5% of the total U.S. population, with more than 17 million residents. The bureau reported about 327 million people in the U.S. that year.

Amid calls to join the 42 other states and the District of Columbia in issuing stay-at-home orders, the Republican governors of the eight states have given various explanations for why they haven't issued such directives.

Michael Pearlman, communications director for Wyoming Gov. Mark Gordon, said state officials have taken precautions to combat the spread of the coronavirus.

"Governor Gordon believes that a 'stay-at-home' or 'shelter-in-place' orders containing large numbers of exemptions like those found in many other states will not provide any additional public health protections beyond the orders Wyoming currently has in place," Mr. Pearlman told The Washington Times.

Wyoming's health department has reported the fewest cases among the eight states, with 275 cases and one death as of Monday.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said the state and national constitutions prevent American governments from taking "draconian measures" similar to what the Chinese government has done to limit its citizens' movements and activities.

"My role in respect to public safety is something I take very seriously," Mrs. Noem said earlier this month. "The people themselves are primarily responsible for their safety. They are the ones entrusted with expansive freedoms. They're free to exercise their rights to work, to worship and to play or to even stay home or to conduct social distancing."

She said since February she has been clear that people need to take personal responsibility for the health and well-being of their families by practicing good hygiene and social distancing to stop the spread of the virus. Mrs. Noem said the state has pushed back its peak in coronvirus cases by six weeks via its public health measures.

Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said his state is turning to its "world-renowned" health experts for advice and is using a "regional approach," understanding that the virus is not going to spread at the same rate across the state.

"That's why we've broken it up by public health regions and using the rule of thumb about community spread. When you have that one community spread case, that's when we place those restrictive regimes with directed health measures," Mr. Ricketts told NET News this month. "And the reason we do that is because we're really trying to time the directed health measure to get the maximum impact out of it."

Utah has reported the most number of cases of the eight states, with 2,303 infections. Gov. Gary Herbert on Monday extended a stay home directive, not a shelter-in-place order, until May 1.

Oklahoma also has more than 2,000 cases, while Iowa and Arkansas have reported more than 1,000 cases. North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska have each reported fewer than 1,000 cases.

Some state health departments have relied on projection models published by universities such as Harvard and the University of Washington to predict the coronavirus trajectory.
Oklahoma is projected to reach its peak in daily deaths on April 28, Utah on April 29, North Dakota and Arkansas on April 30, South Dakota on May 1, and Nebraska, Iowa and Wyoming on May 2, according to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, an independent health research center at the University of Washington.
Older people are more likely to develop serious illness or to die from COVID-19. People 65 years and older make up about 15% to 17% of the population in seven of the states without statewide stay-at-home orders, according to 2018 census data. In Utah, people 65 years and older made up about 11% of the state population.
By Shen Wu Tan

GII: UPDATE: Mayor says normal life won't return in Grand Island for some time

Teresa Anderson of the Central District Health Department predicted Monday that the number of lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases in the three-county area will continue to escalate.
On Monday afternoon, Central District Health reported a total of 211 lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases. That total was about three times the number reported the previous Monday, when the number of confirmed cases was 68.
The new number consists of 197 cases in Hall County, 11 in Hamilton County and three in Merrick County. The age of those with positive results ranges from 11 to 88. with an average age of 45.
"Our numbers are increasing rapidly as we have relayed to you, and will continue to relay," Anderson said at Monday morning's COVID-19 community update from City Hall.
Near the end of her talk, Anderson said, "We'll continue to report on the numbers, but they are not going to be good."
Anderson stressed the importance of self-protection, including wearing a mask, washing your hands often, using hand sanitizer and staying home.
"Those steps can help prevent the spread of the virus and keep us all healthier. They actually work," Anderson said. "This is not the time to take this casually. This is the time to be very, very watchful and careful."
The other speaker at the briefing was Grand Island Mayor Roger Steele.
"I have been asked the question of when the city will return to normal business and social status. That depends on guidance from the president and on guidance from Gov. Ricketts," Steele said, referring to Gov. Pete Ricketts.
"Gov. Ricketts is coordinating the statewide response to COVD 19," Steele said. "The state of Nebraska issues its recommendations through directed health measures, like those received by the Central District Health Department.
" I do not anticipate that we will see a relaxation of our efforts against COVID-19 for some time." Steele said. "When we are able to return to normal depends on our compliance with social distancing, hand washing and only making essential trips, such as to the pharmacy or grocery store.
"I need your compliance now," Steele said. "If we let up our efforts to combat the virus, we will lengthen the amount of time it takes for us to open up businesses and city facilities, such as the Fieldhouse or the library."
Anderson pointed out that the Nebraska National Guard arrived in Grand Island last Tuesday "to assist us with laboratory testing for COVID-19."

The National Guard finished up its work in Grand Island on Monday. Anderson put in a request for them to return "because we need to keep testing," she said in an interview. During their five days, they tested about 400 people. Some members of the Nebraska State Patrol were tested Monday. Through that testing and additional testing in the community, health officials are finding that 22 percent of those being tested are positive.

"So now we have to assume, as we have for the last few weeks, that the COVID virus is everywhere," she said.

She has said in the past that people without symptoms can be COVID-19 carriers.

"We believe that to still be true, but we also know that there's widespread COVID and symptoms in our community," she said.

For the first week or so, people who have the virus are slightly or moderately ill.

If people are going to sicker, that usually happens in the second week. That applies to both people who have underlying health conditions and those who don't.

"The problem with these severely ill folks is that their lungs become very much affected, that they're not able to breathe and they have to be placed on ventilators. COVID-19 has a very strong possibility of overwhelming our health care system very quickly," Anderson said.

"Our resources are being tested and we're going to find that at some point folks who are sick will have to be transferred to other hospitals," she said. "But we still have an opportunity, each and every one of us, to do our job in preventing the spread of the virus."

Anderson hopes that seamstresses in the community are focusing "on making masks that can be worn during interaction with other individuals and washed on a daily basis." Making those face masks "helps us to preserve health-grade masks for health care workers," she said.

"As the numbers grow, we're going to find a big stress on our ability to provide protective personal equipment to our health care providers and health care workers. We also need to provide these pieces of equipment to our emergency responders," she said.

In the interview later in the day, Anderson said some residents of area nursing homes have been infected by the virus.

That is not surprising, she said, because one would expect "that if we have health care workers in nursing homes who test positive, then we're going to have residents."

Anderson did not have any information on the VA Medical Center in Grand Island.

As of late last week, 28 employees of the JBS beef plant in Grand Island had tested positive for the coronavirus.

She urged people to protect themselves and their family by using masks whenever they're out in public. She encouraged people to stay home as much as possible and stay informed about what's going on in the community.

It's good to communicate with friends and loved ones through FaceTime, the telephone and other electronic devices, she said. "We are fortunate to live in a time where our electronics allow us to do that," she said. We can communicate with each other and "lift each other up."

By Jeff Bahr

KSNB: Central District Health says positive testing rate at 20-25% for the district

GRAND ISLAND, Neb. (KSNB) - In a press conference on Monday, Teresa Anderson with the Central District Health Department said positive tests are increasing rapidly, and that the district is now seeing positive cases at a rate of 20-25%.

"Now we have to assume as we have for some time, that the COVID virus is everywhere. We are seeing widespread in our area people who are showing symptoms as well as those who are asymptomatic." said Anderson.
Anderson also said it is usually in the second week of contracting the virus that people in the area are starting to get sicker from the disease,
"For those who are going to get sicker, it usually happens in the second week of the virus."
She went on to say that we must continue our social distancing efforts in order to keep the spread as low as possible.
Grand Island Mayor Roger Steele reiterated what Anderson had to say as far as social distancing measure and said it will likely be some time before distancing measure are relaxed. And said he will continue going off the guidelines from President Trump and Governor Pete Ricketts.
The district is now at 174 positive cases with 161 of those being in Hall County. Another press conference with more updates on Thursday, April 16.

OWH: 'Our resources are being tested': Grand Island hospital's ICU is filling up fast

The health director overseeing the response to the coronavirus outbreak in Grand Island said she fears that the local health care system could be overwhelmed in the coming weeks.
“Our resources are being tested, and we’re going to find at some point that folks who are sick will have to be transferred to other hospitals,” said Teresa Anderson, the director of the Central District Health Department, at a Monday press conference.
Her remarks came as the number of known coronavirus cases in the Grand Island area continued to spike, doubling since Thursday from 103 cases to 211.
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said Monday that St. Francis Hospital in Grand Island counted four or five patients in its intensive care unit one week ago. Now, more than a dozen of its ICU beds are occupied.
Hospital President Edward Hannon said that as of 4 p.m. Monday, 21 COVID-19 patients were hospitalized there, including 13 who are on ventilators to help them breathe. Last week, the hospital said it had 13 ventilators in its ICU and two more in its neonatal intensive care unit, plus several anesthesia and CPAP machines that could be used in a pinch.
Most people with COVID-19 will experience mild-to-moderate symptoms, if any at all. Others, including those who are older or have underlying health conditions, may require more medical care or breathing support.
St. Francis has erected a negative-pressure respiratory care unit in a tent outside the emergency room, and Hannon said the hospital could add 28 beds, expanding to a capacity of 157 beds, to care for additional patients.
Dr. Gary Anthone, Nebraska’s chief medical officer, said Monday that patients could be transferred to hospitals in Kearney, Lincoln, Omaha or other parts of the state if St. Francis sees a significant surge in the number of patients requiring hospitalization.
Another Grand Island hospital is under construction but isn’t scheduled to open until this summer.
Hannon said St. Francis, which is part of the CHI Health system, can rely on other hospitals to help with staffing, medical equipment and personal protective equipment like masks and gloves. While more COVID-19 patients are requiring treatment, fewer people are in the hospital for other treatment because many elective surgeries have been postponed. The hospital was at about 50% of its total capacity last week.

“CHI Health, spanning from Kearney to Corning, Iowa, has 15 hospitals,” Hannon said in a statement. “While St. Francis has 150 beds in Grand Island, our system overall has more than 2,000 beds, and more than 350 machines that can be used as ventilators.”

“I’m confident our skilled and dedicated staff, and the hospital that’s been here for the community for the last 133 years, can weather this storm,” he continued. “But I’m also reassured that we don’t have to do it alone.”

The Central District Health Department oversees Hall, Hamilton and Merrick Counties, where, as of Monday afternoon, 211 people had tested positive for the coronavirus. That’s a whopping threefold increase from a week earlier, when 68 cases were counted. Four people in Hall County have died.

Most of the cases are clustered in Grand Island, where the Nebraska National Guard collected specimens for testing at a drive-thru site last week. Health officials have said the number of confirmed cases will rise as more people are tested.

The ages of those with the coronavirus range from 11 to 88, with an average age of 45, the Health Department said.

Hall County is second to only Douglas County in the number of coronavirus cases in Nebraska.

Only 559 people had been tested in Hall County as of Monday, out of a population of roughly 61,000, according to figures from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. But 35.5% of those swabbed are testing positive. That’s far higher than the 7.65% positive rate statewide.

Testing has been very limited so far, so those numbers may be skewed by the priority given to people exhibiting serious symptoms and to health care workers and first responders who may be exposed to the virus.

But Anderson has warned residents that the coronavirus threat may not peak there for another month or two.

“We will continue to report on the numbers, but they are not going to be good,” she said.

She asked residents to wear masks when they leave the house and said local seamstresses are working on making reusable, washable face coverings.

“Using these masks helps us to preserve health-grade masks for heath care workers,” she said.

Grand Island Mayor Roger Steele said the city will not be able to ease restrictions on businesses and social gatherings until it can get a handle on the virus.

“When we are able to return to normal depends on our compliance with social distancing, hand-washing and only making essential trips” to places like the pharmacy and grocery store, he said. “I need your compliance now.”

By Erin Duffy

OWH: Nebraska State legislatures' COVID-19 bills: arranging emergency funds, declaring a March Madness champ

While the coronavirus crisis has heightened the role of governors across the country, it also has put a charge into state legislatures.

In the month since coronavirus infected the public consciousness, 35 state legislatures have introduced more than 310 coronavirus-related bills, passing 112 of them so far.

Some have passed laws of substance — transferring millions of dollars from their rainy-day funds, imposing protective measures for health care professionals, expanding sick leave for workers and precluding landlords from evicting tenants, according to a review by the National Conference of

State Legislatures.

And several of those states have passed COVID-related laws that are as strange as the sight of masked grocery shoppers.

You had the random shoutouts: Tennessee lawmakers adopted a resolution honoring Dr. Anthony Fauci, the thoroughly Brooklyn native, for his "invaluable service to the American people during the COVID-19 outbreak." Utah lawmakers expressed "support for the Chinese people."

Then there were these eye rollers:

- Florida lawmakers urgently passed a law … declaring the Florida State Seminoles the 2020 national basketball champs, since COVID-19 wiped out the NCAA tourney. This truly mythical national title gave the football school its first national hoops title, ignoring two things: 1) Florida State hasn't made it past basketball's Elite Eight since 1972. 2) The Seminoles' cross-state rival — the Florida Gators — were fourth in the SEC and on the verge of going to the NCAA tourney as well. But hey, Florida gonna Florida.
- In Hawaii, state lawmakers urged the governor to create a color-coded advisory system to alert the public to the current level of coronavirus danger — proving, once again, that Hawaii really does love its rainbows. No word on whether that color code would mirror the confusing colors of the threat-level midnight bar of terror after 9/11. Hawaii elected officials also urged all commercial airlines to "thoroughly clean and disinfect their aircraft between flights to prevent the spread of illnesses and disease."
- In Alabama, a law was passed urging individuals to fist bump rather than shake hands.

In all, Alabama filed seven pieces of legislation — losing out (as in football) to Louisiana, which introduced an astonishing 33 pieces of legislation.

By contrast, Nebraska and Iowa were among the least-active legislative bodies in the nation, each passing one coronavirus law or one packaged law. Iowa passed a law designed to steer appropriations during the crisis and to remove the classroom instructional time requirement for students whose schools are now closed. Nebraska, meanwhile, steered one of the biggest amounts of money ($83.6 million) in the nation from its rainy-day fund to the governor's emergency cash fund.

Of course, Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts and Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds have issued a flurry of directed health measures — some meaty, some not so much. Lids on crowds. Lids on mixed drinks.

A number of Omaha law firms are tracking those measures, big and small. Koley Jessen, Kutak Rock, McGrath North, Baird Holm, Fraser Stryker and Husch Blackwell, among others, are tracking COVID-19-related laws and financial relief packages for employees and employers, businesses and corporations.

Husch Blackwell, which advises businesses and government agencies and has a lobbying arm, has a team of about 20 attorneys and staffers monitoring laws across the nation, said Dave Lopez, an Omaha attorney.

In mid-March, Lopez and his colleagues began developing a state-by-state guide on directed health measures, stay-at-home orders and restrictions from Alaska to Wyoming. Lopez said they update the site daily.

"When the scope of this became clear, we knew this public-health crisis would have an impact on our clients' operations," Lopez said. "Many of our clients are in critical sectors like agriculture, health care, food service. They want to ensure they can remain operational through the shutdown orders."

Early on, the database was in constant flux. Now, only eight states, including Nebraska and Iowa, are working without a statewide shelter-in-place order. Even so, the terms "shelter in place" and "essential worker" have different meanings in different states.

The database gives an interesting snapshot of the landscape of America. In Florida, essential businesses allowing workers to avoid a shutdown order include pool boys and landscapers.

Michigan has been stringent in its guidelines — restricting essential workers to anyone who is necessary to sustain or protect life and outlining how many people can be in a building based on its square footage. Closer to home, Reynolds expanded her nonessential businesses to include tobacco or vape stores, gaming and adult entertainment stores, malls, museums, libraries, campgrounds and social clubs, including those at golf courses.

Ricketts followed suit Thursday, closing these spots for the rest of April: all beauty/nail salons, barbershops, massage therapy services, gentlemen's clubs, bottle clubs, indoor theaters and tattoo parlors/studios. Ricketts also suspended all organized team sports, adult or youth, until May 31.

The scattered approach of states will be as interesting in retrospect as it is in real time, said Lopez, a former assistant Nebraska attorney general.

"What works in New York is different from what works in Nebraska," Lopez said. "At the end of all of this, when you take the body of actions that have been taken to stem the tide and you line that up against the infection statistics, I think it will provide an overview of what was effective."

By Todd Cooper

OWH: 10 workers at Hastings meatpacking plant, 1 worker at Fremont chicken plant have COVID-19

Ten workers at a beef processing facility in Hastings and one worker at a Fremont plant that produces chickens for Costco are the latest food workers to test positive for the novel coronavirus.

The South Heartland District Health Department reported this weekend that 10 workers at a Western Reserve beef facility in Hastings have tested positive.

The department "is working closely with Western Reserve management to complete the contact investigations, to provide recommendations for employee safety and to provide additional testing for their workforce," the health director there said in a press release.

Western Reserve officials did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

Hastings is in Adams County, just south of Grand Island, a current coronavirus hot spot. The number of positive cases in Adams County is growing too, with 54 people there testing positive as of Sunday. Only 247 people in Adams County have been tested so far, according to Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services figures released Monday night, meaning 23% of tests there are coming back positive. Statewide, only 7.65% of people being tested have the coronavirus, although widespread testing has not been available in Nebraska.

Those cases also include three workers at a Hastings Walmart who worked there between March 26 and April 5.

Lincoln Premium Poultry, the company that runs a Fremont chicken plant that opened last September and supplies Costco with millions of rotisserie chickens and other cuts, announced its first COVID-19 case Monday. The plant employs roughly 1,100 people.

"The employee worked in what we refer to as the 'second processing' part of the building and was on second shift, which runs in the evening and has fewer employees at this time," spokeswoman Jessica Kolterman said in a statement. "The person did not engage with many employees the last day they were in our facility, which was last Wednesday, April 8. We have arranged a deep clean of all areas of our facility and work will continue as scheduled."

Kolterman said the employee is recovering at home, with pay, and that two co-workers who may have been exposed also are self-isolating at home with pay.

"We are very proud of our employees who are working on the front lines of this virus each day to

keep food on the table for American families and will continue to do everything we can to protect them," she said.
Workers have tested positive at other Nebraska meatpacking and food processing facilities, including the JBS USA beef plant and McCain Foods frozen appetizer plant, both in Grand Island. Many food facilities employ hundreds, if not thousands, of people who work in close proximity to each other packaging food or cutting meat.
Several facilities, including a Smithfield pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, have closed temporarily to contain the spread of the virus after dozens of workers tested positive.
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said Monday that he had not heard of any Nebraska plants planning to shut down production.
Many plants are taking precautionary steps, including having workers wear masks, taking temperatures before the start of shifts and putting up plastic dividers between work stations or in cafeterias, but workers have told union representatives and other advocacy groups that they fear falling ill. Those organizations are pushing for stronger, more uniform safety measures, like slowing down production lines and spacing workers out further.
"The environment is very challenging to do social distancing in, but it's absolutely important to keep our food processing facilities going because it's vital we continue to have that strong supply chain here in the United States," Ricketts said at his Monday press briefing. "Here in Nebraska, we're the beef state. We feed the world and it's important to continue to do that. ... We'll continue to work with companies to make sure we're doing all we can to keep those supply lines open."
The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says there is currently no evidence of the coronavirus being transmitted by food or food packaging.
By Erin Duffy

LJS: Divided Lincoln City Council votes to meet virtually over city attorney's legal concerns

A divided Lincoln City Council, against its lawyer's advice, narrowly agreed to meet virtually during the next two weeks rather than in person as state and local health officials brace for escalating transmission of the coronavirus in Nebraska.
The four-member majority agreed to follow other local governments under an executive order issued by Gov. Pete Ricketts that waives in-person meeting requirements under state open-meetings laws provided public notice of the meeting is given and access to the meeting remains.
Councilwoman Sändra Washington proposed the meeting changes because she believes the technology exists to allow transparency and retain public involvement in the meetings.
"I believe the essential work of governing continues whether we are working through an emergency or not," she said in proposing the virtual meetings. "And I think it's good sense that we allow ourselves the flexibility to meet at a responsible and safe distance in order to provide ourselves and staff the same precautions we are asking of others."
At a Monday afternoon meeting before the main council meeting, an assistant city attorney used a forehead thermometer to screen each of the council members, several of whom wore masks during portions of the meeting.
"We have an obligation not only to conduct city business but to keep every single person that we come into contact with safe also," Councilman James Michael Bowers said, speaking through a blue surgical mask.

He pointed to the Lancaster County commissioners, who held their first County Board meeting via videoconference last week and will hold their second virtual meeting Tuesday.
The Omaha City Council held its last meeting March 17 and doesn't plan to meet again until April 21.
The Nebraska Legislature has suspended its session and has met only for emergency votes.
Lincoln City Attorney Jeff Kirkpatrick last week asked council members wary of meeting in person during the pandemic to favor suspending meetings and meeting only on an emergency basis in person to vote on measures vital to continued city operations.
His office concluded that the governor didn't have authority to waive state law requirements governing meetings of city governments such as Lincoln's.
Councilman Richard Meginnis said he felt the council can't continue to meet in person, but meeting virtually jeopardizes the projects the council may approve during such meetings.
Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson's office backed the governor's executive order, and Lancaster County Attorney Pat Condon said the governor's broad emergency powers to suspend regulations or rules concerning public business would extend to state open-meetings laws that dictate how the business of forming public policy proceeds.
Washington, Bowers, Councilwoman Tammy Ward and Council Chair Jane Raybould voted in the majority, while Meginnis and Councilmen Bennie Shobe and Roy Christensen opposed the change.
Following the divided vote, the council unanimously agreed to meet in person May 4.
By Riley Johnson

KLKN: Food Bank of Lincoln expects tens of thousands to be food insecure in coming months

The Food Bank of Lincoln is facing an uphill battle as a result of the coronavirus.
The influx of supplies and demand has caused an imminent problem with food delivery and supply.
“One of our big challenges right now in food insecurity in the state of Nebraska is that resource are going down while the need is going up,” said Lincoln Food Bank executive director Scott Young. “The grocery stores were we pick up so much product are moving so much product and some.”
The supply for grocery stores is fine Governor Pete Ricketts said on Monday. However, the food that once wouldn’t move on shelves is now hitting the checkout line and leaving little spare left over.
Grocery stores donate a large part of the food bank’s product. With no surplus from these grocery stores, limited donations can be made.
Feeding America projects between 80,000 and 100,000 people will be food insecure in the coming months here in Nebraska.
Suppliers only have so much and with the demand nation wide so high, food banks are swimming with sharks in the sea of retail.
“Food we order now may take 4-6 weeks to show up at our food bank,” said Young. “So we have great concern not only right now but in the coming months.”
300 people applied for SNAP benefits last week and he expects that number to rise quickly. Find out if you are eligible for SNAP.
Over the weekend, Grand Island held a food pickup site. The Food Bank of the Heartland packed 750 bags to give out. Over 1,000 people showed up. People left without food.
That is an issue Young wants to fix. He says now more than ever donations are needed. If you would like to help click HERE.
By Lee Marion

WJAG: Amount of food insecure people in Nebraska increasing

LINCOLN - With kids home and not at school and lots of parents without jobs, the amount of food insecure people and families in Nebraska is projected to increase.
During the daily coronavirus press conference at the Capitol Monday Scott Young with the Food Bank of Lincoln said Feeding America has anticipated a 45 percent increase in food insecure people during the next six months.
Young said Nebraska currently has 223,000 food insecure people.
"One of our big challenges right now in food insecurity in Nebraska is that resources are going down while the need is going up. The grocery stores where we pick up so much product, they're moving everything they have and then some. The food pipelines are starting to get a little bit awkward and are choking up a little bit in terms of demand across the country."
Young said food they order now takes four to six weeks to show up, so they are concerned about the coming months and how this summer may impact food insecurity in the state.
In regards to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program also known as SNAP, Governor Pete Ricketts said the state is extending the recertification period six months for anyone needing to recertify in April or May.
By Cody Ronnfeldt

Daily Beast: Nebraskans in Virus Hot Zone 'Terrified' After Governor Rejects Stay-at-Home Order

At home in Grand Island, Nebraska, retired cook Henry Anderson hears the sounds of growing panic from the radio scanner that hangs from a nail on his living room wall.
On Friday morning, there was chatter about a young woman and her daughter who were sick but also confused because they had not been around anyone infected with the new coronavirus. Earlier in the week, he remembered, the scanner brought word of a man who tested negative when he first fell ill but was now wondering if he should get retested because "it got all up in his lungs," and he was pretty sure he had the virus.
"I get more news on the scanner than you do in the local newspaper," Anderson, 64, told The Daily Beast. "There's all kinds of things you don't hear about."
A hundred miles away in Lincoln, there's an almost eerie calm—at least publicly.
Pete Ricketts has closed schools (even before New York City did), banned gatherings of 10 people or more, and closed dine-in areas in restaurants—but he is one of only eight governors in the country to resist a statewide stay-at-home order. The state's May 12 primary is still on the books, and last week, Ricketts was already talking about easing what restrictions are in place.
"Reopening sit-down restaurants and bars may be a part of that," Ricketts, a conservative Republican, said on Wednesday. "As we get into this toward the end of the month, we'll be re-evaluating where we are with regard to where the virus is and making those decisions."
By the numbers, Nebraska is in better shape than most other places. With 871 COVID-19 infections and 18 recorded coronavirus deaths, it's in the bottom 10 states.
But Nebraska also ranks 43rd in the rate of testing, which means there could be many undetected cases. Over the weekend, cases were reported for the first time in three more counties. And the number of cases statewide shot up by 100—the biggest one-day total so far—between Saturday and

Sunday.
In Grand Island, the numbers are worse, and some residents are bristling at the governor's approach to a pandemic that has killed over 23,000 Americans.
Hall County, which encompasses the city, has reported 197 COVID-19 cases—a per capita rate six times the statewide average. There have been four deaths, according to the state health department, and verified exposure in three nursing homes. Testing over the course of the last several days showed a positive rate of 20 to 25 percent, according to health officials.
"Our numbers have been increasing rapidly," Teresa Anderson, director of the Central District Health Department, which oversees Hall and two other counties, said Monday. "Now we have to assume... the COVID virus is everywhere."
The local hospital, CHI Health St. Francis, had 11 inpatients with coronavirus last week. That was up to 21 on Monday, with 13 of them in the ICU—which has only 13 ventilators. Anderson said it was likely as the crisis progressed, some patients would have to be transferred elsewhere.
"We'll continue to report on the numbers," she said. "But they are not going to be good."
Grand Island, population 50,000, is not a center of political power like Lincoln or home to Fortune 500 headquarters like Omaha. It's a blue-collar town that is one of the most diverse cities in the state.
It's not entirely clear how the outbreak started there. The first three cases were not related to each other, had not traveled, and did not have close contact with any known carriers.
Anderson of the Health Department said there were unfounded rumors it began at a quinceanera, or a girl's 15th birthday party; Grand Island is 31 percent Hispanic, according to census estimates.
"Everyone wants to look for something they can hang their hat on or something to blame but scientifically it doesn't bear out," she said.
At least 28 of the infected work at the JBS meat-packing plant, which remains open—even as another major local business, CNH Industrial, announced it was ceasing operations last week to protect its workforce.
Anderson said health officials don't know if COVID-19 was being spread from worker to worker at JBS, which has 3,000 employees in Grand Island. "That's the mystery. We don't know exactly where it's getting picked up. It could be here, there, anywhere," she said.
One thing that is clear: Many local officials and medical professionals wish Ricketts had issued a stay-at-home order to send a message that social distancing is not simply a recommendation, but a mandate.
Among other appeals, 45 Grand Island doctors signed a letter to the governor earlier this month, asking him to relent. But even a face-to-face meeting with Ricketts didn't budge him.
"There are many folks among us who believe that a shelter-in-place would be an effective way to separate people for a two-week period, thereby reducing the spread," Anderson said at a briefing last week, after that meeting.
"And both the medical community, the mayor, and the public health requested that of the governor. He doesn't think this is the right time to do it—so that's his responsibility."
That doesn't sit well with Henry Anderson, who was born with a lung disorder and would be at high risk for complications if he was infected.
"You can thank Ricketts for that," he said. "He's just like Trump, he's followed Trump, don't matter if it's good for Nebraska or not."
He added that when numbers were ticking up in Colorado last month, Gov. Jared Polis quickly shut things down. "And what'd Ricketts do? Nothing… He's not doing enough and hasn't done it soon

enough."
One thing Ricketts did do was dispatch the National Guard to Grand Island for drive-through testing, but the capacity is only 75 tests for each of five days. First responders and health-care professionals got priority, followed by people in homeless shelters, and residents who have been diagnosed by their doctors solely on the basis of their symptoms.
Those 375 tests did not begin to touch the demand in Grand Island. And without more testing, authorities won't know how many people are actually infected and what the health care infrastructure could be facing in the coming weeks.
As Anderson, the health official, noted, because so few people have been tested, "a count of 60 [positive test results] turns into more like a count of 600 [actual infections]."
Miguel Estevez, a mental health therapist at the Friendship House outpatient clinic, said his mother, who was exposed to someone infected, is probably among the uncounted.
"My mom had all the symptoms, she had fever, she had all of that and they didn't test her," he said. "She's had the symptoms for the past week and a half. Other people from her friend group went to the ER and they didn't test them and it took them a couple tries to be like 'I feel like shit,' before they actually tested them."
CHI Health St. Francis said it expects to expand testing this week. President Ed Hannon told The Daily Beast the hospital was at 50 percent capacity and can accommodate up to 150 patients. Although it has just 13 ventilators, there are 14 other machines that can be repurposed if needed.
Hannon said he doesn't think it will come to that. "This is working. We are not seeing the surge that we have seen in other parts of the world or in New York City, because here in Nebraska we have been staying home, social distancing," he said.
But not everyone in Grand Island has been following the toothless recommendation.
Jose Gaytan, 42, a self-employed construction worker, said he has been going to hardware stores to buy supplies and finishing up jobs, although the coronavirus has spread enough that he plans to stop working now.
A friend of his who works at JBS was sick with symptoms that jibe with COVID-19, though he has not been tested, Gaytan said. Another JBS employee he knows was staying home but has returned to work since more social-distancing measures were put in place. She eats in her car and heads into work early so she doesn't have to "bunch in with the whole crowd as they're going in," he explained.
Because JBS is part of the food-supply chain, it would be exempt from any stay-at-home order. "It's really important to understand that if the state went under lockdown, JBS would continue to operate," said Schuyler Geery-Zink, staff attorney for the Immigrants and Community Program at Nebraska Appleseed, a workers' justice nonprofit.
In a statement, a JBS spokesperson told The Daily Beast, "The health and safety of our communities and our team members providing food for us all during this unprecedented time remains our top priority." They went on to note "numerous safety measures, health protocols and worker benefits," including temperature testing employees, relaxed attendance and expanded paid-leave policies, the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), and more.
But fears in Grand Island aren't tied to any single business. Gloria Sarmiento, a community organizer for Nebraska Appleseed, said clients have been calling to say they want to stay home, but their employers are staying open, leaving them no choice.
"It's really hard for people to make those decisions," she said. "[They say,] 'I am afraid of work, but I have to do it.'"
In an interview with the Omaha World Herald this weekend, Ricketts said he was keeping close

watch on cases and was reassured that the numbers were not getting out of control.
“They are not going up at a geometric rate right now, and that’s really one of the keys,” he said.
But Estevez said that in Grand Island, there’s a nagging feeling that the situation is already worse than the current numbers suggest—and is only going to intensify without more extreme restrictions.
“People are obviously just terrified,” he said.
By Marcella Mercer

LJS: Nebraska gets $378K per coronavirus patient in federal grants vs. New York's $12K, analysis shows

Allocation of the first $30 billion in emergency federal grants to hospitals and doctors to fight the coronavirus has favored states such as Nebraska over hard-hit New York when measured on a per-capita basis, and that has triggered a national media storm.
A study by Kaiser Health News resulted in this headline in the Daily Beast that stirred internet traffic: "Nebraska getting $300G in federal money for each coronavirus case while NY gets $12G."
That outcome resulted from a decision by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to distribute the first $30 billion in a $100 billion emergency aid package designed to target grants to hospitals and doctors on the basis of Medicare billings rather than the number of coronavirus cases.
HHS said it used that criteria to rush forward with initial payments as quickly as possible.
The next slice of the $100 billion in assistance will be targeted to areas that have been particularly impacted by the virus and to rural hospitals.
The federal grants were approved by Congress "to prevent, prepare for and respond to coronavirus," with funding provided for protective equipment, testing supplies, extra employees and temporary shelters.
The Kaiser study pointed to Minnesota, Nebraska and Montana as states that are particularly advantaged by the initial allocation of funds.
HHS "has failed to consider congressional intent" in distributing the first $30 billion by not accounting for the number of cases hospitals are treating, New Jersey Sens. Bob Menendez and Cory Booker and Rep. Bill Pascrell stated in a letter dispatched to HHS Secretary Alex Azar.
By Don Walton

OWH: Nebraska reports 18th death from coronavirus; cases jump in Grand Island area

The number of people in Nebraska known to be infected by the coronavirus rose to 871 on Monday, up 57 from the weekend. One new death was reported, bringing that total to 18.
In Iowa, 1,710 cases have been confirmed, up 123 from Sunday. Two more people died.
The Nebraska death involved a man in his 90s in Washington County, according to the Three Rivers Public Health Department. His illness had previously been reported.
The new Nebraska numbers include a staggering increase in the Grand Island area. Since Friday, cases have doubled from 103 to 211, according to the Central District Health Department.
Ten new cases of the coronavirus were reported Sunday and Monday in Douglas County, bringing the county’s total to 245.
Douglas and Hall Counties lead the state in cases, followed by Adams, Lancaster and Sarpy Counties.
Four more cases were reported in Lancaster County, bringing that county’s total to 56.
In three of the new Douglas County cases, the people have been hospitalized. But plenty of hospital

beds and ventilators remain available, according to figures provided by the Douglas County Health Department.
As of Sunday evening, 38 people in Douglas County were hospitalized with the virus, and 599 medical surge beds remained available.
Of 392 ventilators available to area hospitals, 115 are in use, including 11 for confirmed COVID-19 patients, according to the Health Department.
The 10 new Douglas County cases are evenly divided between men and women, and the people range in age from 28 to 72 years old.
Five of the people had contact with a known infected person, two cases have been confirmed to be community-acquired, one is thought to be travel-related, and two remain under investigation.
The new cases in Lancaster County involve a woman in her 20s and three men in their 40s and 50s, Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said.
A total of seven new Lancaster County cases have been reported since the weekend. Of those cases, five are known to be community spread cases. The total number of confirmed community spread cases is now 37, Baird said.
In the Council Bluffs area, Pottawattamie County recorded its 13th case and first death Monday.
A woman between 61 and 80 years old with preexisting medical conditions became Pottawattamie County's first death from COVID-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus. Authorities have not been able to figure out how she came in contact with the disease. She became ill on March 30 and had been in intensive care since April 7.
By Nancy Gaarder

OWH: Coronavirus exposure possible in Atkinson after Red Cross blood drive worker tests positive

A worker at an American Red Cross blood drive in Atkinson, Nebraska, tested positive for the coronavirus, putting donors at a slight risk for exposure, the North Central District Health Department said.
The blood drive in Atkinson, northwest of O'Neill, was held April 1, while the worker was symptomatic, the health department said.
The Nebraska-Iowa Region of the American Red Cross, in a statement, said the employee last worked April 3 and noticed a high temperature two days later. The organization was notified April 7 that she had tested positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.
The North Central District Health Department, Central District Health Department and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services have been tracing potential contacts and reaching out to blood donors and others who may have crossed paths with the worker. Officials there said they think there is a low risk of exposure, because the worker told them that she wore a mask the entire time during the blood drive.
"As the window for exposure ends on April 15, additional risk for COVID-19 to the greater community as a result of this event remains extremely low," state health officials said in a statement. "Widespread testing is not warranted at this time because most donors and volunteers had very limited, if any, exposure."
Fourteen potential close contacts, including several other Red Cross workers, were identified and contacted by the Red Cross on Friday. At that time, all were showing no symptoms and quarantining at home.

Because the quarantining will lead to some staffing shortages, some mobile blood drives are canceled.
“Out of an abundance of caution, the Red Cross is notifying donors of possible exposure to the coronavirus,” Red Cross spokesman Josh Murray said in a statement. “No blood donors have contacted the Red Cross at this time to report any symptoms following their donation.”
The Red Cross has been asking people to continue donating blood throughout the coronavirus pandemic while trying to reassure potential donors that the process is safe.
“Patients rely on the Red Cross to maintain the nation’s blood supply, so we are navigating this challenging environment to do just that,” Murray said. “We want to emphasize that Red Cross staff adhere to the highest standards of safety and infection control.”
The organization is spreading out donors at collection sites and checking the temperatures of staff and donors before they enter a blood drive. Workers now must take their temperature before coming to work at a blood drive or donation center, wear face masks and remain home if they exhibit any symptoms of COVID-19.
By Erin Duffy

KNEB: Local Officials: New Rapid COVID-19 Tests May Take Time to be Available in Panhandle

Health officials in the Nebraska Panhandle say it may be a while before we start to see the availability of new rapid test kits just starting to roll out in a number of locations across the country.
Scotts Bluff County Health Director Paulette Schnell says State Epidemiologist Dr. Tom Safranek has indicated there are differences between the new tests from Abbott compared to those conducted at the state health lab.
“He’s addressed this specific test they do at the (State) Lab as being very sensitive,” says Schnell. “There is the new test coming out, the Abbott test, it’s a 15-minute turnaround they’re hoping to get. They’ve got the machines coming out, but the actual kits are slow in coming. But the sensitivity for that one is lower.”
However, Schnell does say that once the Abbott test becomes more widely available, the faster turnaround time for results would make them a good screening tool for use by health care professionals.
By Scott Miller

LJS: Some meatpacking plants hit hard by COVID-19, others virtually unscathed

With more than 1,000 people processing chickens daily, Jessica Kolterman knew it was likely just a matter of time before the coronavirus found its way into the workforce at the Lincoln Premium Poultry plant in Fremont.
"With having around 1,100 employees, we fully anticipate that we could have a case at any point in time," Kolterman, a spokeswoman for the Fremont-based company that provides broiler chickens to Costco, said Monday morning.
That point in time came Monday afternoon, when the company reported its first case of COVID-19. The employee, Kolterman said, works an evening shift and in a part of the building with fewer people. They last reported for work April 8.
Kolterman said a deep clean of the facility has been scheduled, but work will continue.

Lincoln Premium Poultry joins a number of food processing plants across the country with COVID-19 cases.

But the virus' toll has not been consistent. Some plants have been hit hard, with dozens or even hundreds of cases, while other plants have been virtually unscathed.

Take industry giant Smithfield, for example. The company Sunday announced that it will close its pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, indefinitely starting Wednesday, after more than 200 workers were diagnosed with the disease. The plant employs about 3,700 people and processes about 5% of the nation's pork supply.

Hall County, which has more cases than any other county in Nebraska except Douglas County, has seen more than two dozen cases linked to the JBS beef plant in Grand Island, which has about 3,600 employees.

The Grand Island plant has remained open, but JBS on Friday said it would close its plant in Greeley, Colorado, through Tuesday for deep cleaning. Three dozen employees of the plant have tested positive for the virus, and two workers have died.

Over the weekend, the South Heartland District Health Department reported that 10 workers at the Western Reserve beef facility in Hastings had tested positive.

With the exception of plants in the Tri-Cities area, there have been few reported cases linked to meatpacking plants in Nebraska.

Pat Lopez, interim health director of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department, said Monday she's not aware of any cases linked to food processing businesses in the county.

Saline County, where Smithfield has a plant in Crete that employs about 2,000 workers, has yet to report a positive case.

Kim Showalter, director of Public Health Solutions, the health department covering Fillmore, Gage, Jefferson, Saline and Thayer counties, said she spoke to plant management as recently as Friday.

There also have not been any confirmed cases linked to the Cargill Meat Solutions plant in Schuyler, said Julie McClure of the East Central District Health Department.

Tyson Foods, which closed a pork plant in Iowa last week after more than two dozen cases of the virus, has not yet reported a similar outbreak in Nebraska, where it owns meatpacking plants in Dakota City, Lexington, Madison and Omaha; poultry processing facilities in Waverly and Tecumseh; and Cook's Hams in Lincoln.

Tyson did not respond to a request for comment, but in a blog post on its website, the company said it has taken a number of measures to protect workers, including taking the temperature of employees before they enter facilities and offering protective face shields to workers who request them.

Cargill, which in addition to its plant in Schuyler owns one in Nebraska City, also did not respond to a request for comment. Among the things it says it is doing to keep workers safe are temperature testing, extra cleaning and sanitizing, prohibiting visitors and adopting social distancing practices.

Lincoln Premium Poultry has made many of the same moves, but Kolterman said another important aspect of keeping workers safe is making sure they are informed.

"Education, education, education — we started communicating with our teams over a month ago on best practices for hygiene, reminding them to stay home if they were sick, etc.," she said.

"Our leadership team is very hands-on and started spending even more time in the break rooms during breaks, going table to table to answer questions and provide education," Kolterman said, noting that the company also provided interpreters.

By Matt Olberding

LJS: Health director: Lincoln residents' actions have likely held down coronavirus cases

While other health departments in Nebraska have seen their number of confirmed cases skyrocket in recent days, most notably Hall and Adams counties, Lincoln's early efforts to promote self-quarantining and self-isolation have seemed to slow the spread of the virus locally, the director of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department said.

"We've been really fortunate, because people have been listening to that message: 'If you're not feeling well, stay home and get in touch with your health care provider,'" interim health director Pat Lopez said Monday. "We feel it's made a tremendous difference in the community in looking at how many of the cases might be related to one another."

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported 57 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Lancaster County as of 6 p.m. Monday, putting the state's second-most populous county fourth on the list of confirmed cases in Nebraska.

On Monday, Hall County's state-reported total rose to 199 lab-confirmed cases out of 559 total tests, while neighboring Adams County has 58 lab-confirmed cases from 247 total tests.

Lancaster County has reported 1,673 negative tests and has 15 pending at the Nebraska Public Health Lab as of Monday evening, the local health department said.

Douglas County has the most confirmed cases in Nebraska, with 247 positive tests out of 3,232 people tested.

Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said while the city has relatively few positive cases compared with others based on population, health officials do expect to see more cases in the coming days.

"We are continuing to see an increase in the ability to provide more testing in Lincoln," she said at an afternoon news conference. "A major reason is drive-thru testing sites at Bryan Health's LifePointe and CHI Health and North Star High School."

Bryan Health can test between 80 and 100 people daily, while CHI can perform about 30, the mayor said.

Lincoln reported four more lab-confirmed cases of the coronavirus Monday.

According to the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department, two men in their 50s and another in his 40s, as well as a woman in her 20s, were diagnosed with COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.

Five of the seven local cases reported over the weekend and on Monday are known to be community-spread, the health department said, meaning it's not clear how those individuals contracted the disease.

Lopez said Monday the vast majority of Lancaster County's coronavirus cases in the last week are the result of community-spread.

"If you look back at our numbers from the last week, 90% of our cases were community-spread," Lopez said. "We feel it's very prevalent, and that's why we're urging people to stay home and stay healthy."

Health officials are continuing to monitor 75 individuals who have reported symptoms related to COVID-19 — which include fever, cough and shortness of breath — as well as trace the contacts of those who have confirmed instances of the disease.

The efforts by individuals to stay at home whenever possible has led the health department to cease reporting locations where others may have been exposed to an individual carrying the virus, Lopez said. While those announcements could return, she said they were more effective earlier in the

outbreak.
Statewide, there are 871 total cases and 18 deaths as of Monday evening, including one death in Lincoln.
By Chris Dunker

LJS: Report: Nebraska lost $63 million in March because of COVID-19

In March alone, Nebraska's economy is estimated to have taken a more than $63 million hit from the coronavirus pandemic.
That's the conclusion of a report released Monday by two Nebraska economists in conjunction with the Platte Institute, a Nebraska government-policy think tank.
The report, prepared by Creighton University economics professor Ernie Goss and Scott Strain, senior economist at Goss & Associates and an adjunct professor at the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, estimates that Nebraska lost more than 6,400 jobs in March, $17.2 million in wages and $2.2 million in self-employment income.
The report also estimates the state lost more than $3.1 million in state and local tax collections.
The report used modeling software to estimate the impacts, because very little hard data is available yet. For example, March unemployment data for Nebraska won't be released until Friday.
The report estimates that the state's unemployment rate increased nearly 1 percentage point in March, which would be the second-lowest increase in the country, trailing only Pennsylvania.
Since March 14, Nebraska has seen nearly 67,000 new claims for unemployment.
The report did not take into account any potential stimulus money that businesses or individuals in the state may receive from the federal government.
Sen. Deb Fischer said in a news release Monday that as of April 7, nearly 8,000 small businesses in Nebraska had applied for loans through the U.S. Small Business Administration, totaling about $1.5 billion.
Sarah Curry, policy director for the Platte Institute, said in a letter accompanying the report that the "major impact" of the virus on Nebraska's economy is likely to be in April, and that the group plans to update the report as more economic data becomes available.
By Matt Olberding

LJS: Nebraska livestock auctions strive to keep supply of meat moving

COLUMBUS — Longtime Columbus Sales Pavilion Inc. owner Travis Bock feels caught between a rock and a hard place.
On one hand, the business provides livestock auctions for farmers to market their cattle, and in turn, it supports the local economy by helping supply meat and employing people. On the other, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected his business' profits and caused some stress.
"Our numbers have been cut 60%-70% in the last three weeks," Bock said.
And Bock has heard some questions within the community as to why the business remains open.
Bock reasons Columbus Sales Pavilion is an essential business. In essence, it's selling cattle from producers to buyers as part of the farm-to-food process. Several steps later, meat is sold to the grocery stores, which then sell it to consumers.
"We're that first part of the service industry," Bock said, noting the role livestock markets across the state play. "By the governor of Nebraska, we are labeled as an essential business for the trade and

sale of livestock for the food chain."
That said, things have changed to follow all protocols as outlined by state officials amid the pandemic.
No spectators or sellers are attending sales, only registered buyers. And those buyers must maintain 6 feet of separation.
The cafe is closed, and officials have added several hand-sanitizer stations.
The Columbus business has auctions every Thursday (stocker and feeder cattle) and Friday (bulls and slaughter cows) and on alternating Tuesdays (sheep, goats, feeder pigs and slaughter hogs).
Bock said before the pandemic, an auction would average 120-140 people. Last Thursday, it had 16 people in attendance.
The loss in revenue is a challenge, even as the auctions continue. Bock has six full-time employees and 15 part-time employees he's also trying to support under the circumstances.
"We've cut back on help and have only certain people coming in at certain times, limiting staff," he said. "I want to keep food on the tables for employees; I'm trying hard not to let any of them go."
Gary Hines, a longtime auctioneer, said it's a trying time for the livestock auction business.
"Our receipts are definitely lower, and the market has dropped considerably," Hines said. "But we're an instrumental part of the business and keeping food on the table for the public. We sell a lot of cows here."
Livestock auctions in Columbus and across the state have the support of Nebraska leaders.
"Nebraska's livestock industry plays a critical role in the food production system for our state and nation," Nebraska Department of Agriculture Director Steve Wellman said. "We need to ensure that agriculture doesn't stop so that commerce can keep moving and we can continue to produce quality meat products."
Bock's great-grandfather, Marion H. Van Berg, started the business in 1933. He's now the fourth generation of the family to own and operate it, noting he takes the family legacy very seriously. It's undoubtedly a trying time, but he's determined to make the most of it for his hometown.
Said Bock: "I've never seen anything like this in my lifetime."
By Matt Lindberg

AP: Feds: Online drug dealer planned to bomb Nebraska pharmacy

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — A Maryland man who operated an online drug dealing website engaged in extensive plans to bomb and burn down a competing pharmacy in Nebraska, an FBI agent testified Monday.
At a hearing in federal court in Alexandria, Virginia, the agent testified that William Burgamy, 32, of Hanover, Maryland, was getting his supply of drugs from a pharmacist in Nebraska. Under the plan discussed in a journal and text messages, Burgamy and his supplier pharmacist reasoned that if the competing pharmacy were destroyed, Burgamy's pharmacist would pick up new customers and could then increase his supply to Burgamy without attracting suspicion, authorities said.
"The defendant is a dangerous and volatile individual who schemed to blow up that pharmacy using Molotov cocktails," prosecutor Raj Parekh said.
Neither the testimony nor the court documents specified the Nebraska town or towns where the pharmacies were located.
During a two-hour detention hearing conducted by conference call, FBI agent Samad Shahrani said that a search of Burgamy's home found eight loaded weapons in his residence. Text messages

showed that he made a list of needed equipment that included body armor, weapons, bottles, lighter fluid and other materials. Last month his pharmacist gave him a map that could be used to plot his getaway after bombing the rival pharmacy, Shahrani testified.
U.S. Magistrate Judge Michael Nachmanoff ordered Burgamy to remain in jail pending trial after Monday's detention hearing.
Public defender Elizabeth Mullin had argued Burgamy should be released pending trial, saying that his talk about firebombing a pharmacy was just hyperbole. She also said pretrial detention should be used sparingly because jails can be a particular risk for spreading the coronavirus.
Burgamy "does not have an unrequited thirst for violence," Mullin said.
Burgamy was arrested last week on charges of illegal drug distribution and money laundering after prosecutors accused him of selling large-scale quantities of narcotics and other drugs over the internet.
An FBI affidavit states Burgamy operated a business on the Darknet called NeverPressedRX that sold oxycodone and other narcotics over the internet without a prescription.
Court papers do not specify the volume of transactions, but show Burgamy regularly exchanged thousands of dollars worth of Bitcoin used in the purchases for U.S. currency.
Burgamy boasted on his vendor page late last month that, "Even with Corona Virus the shop is running at full speed," according to the affidavit.
By Matt Barakat

OWH Editorial: Packing plants are at threat from virus; all precautions are needed

Most Americans rightly regard the ready availability of food as a given part of life. But the threat from the coronavirus now extends, to a degree, even to the U.S. food supply, as some packing plants are idled due to the virus threat to workers. This week, Smithfield Foods announced that due to the virus outbreak among workers, it's temporarily shutting its massive pork-processing plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which the company says provides 4% to 5% of the nation's pork supply.
Other major U.S. meat and poultry processors, including Tyson Foods, Cargill and JBS USA, have idled some of their plants in other states.
This virus threat is multi-pronged. It's a threat to the plant workers themselves, in terms of their health, and to the general public, in terms of potential virus spread to the broader community. In Sioux Falls, 238 of the Smithfield plant's 3,700 employees have active cases of the coronavirus, accounting for 55% of South Dakota's total. In Grand Island, as of Thursday, 28 workers at the JBS USA beef plant had tested positive for the coronavirus, representing a quarter of the 105 confirmed cases in the Grand Island area. The plant is Grand Island's largest employer.
This threat also extends to the nation's consumers, in terms of food supply reliability, and to agricultural producers, in terms of lower prices they may receive for their beef, chicken or pork.
In announcing the temporary shuttering of the Sioux Falls plant, Smithfield Foods CEO Kenneth Sullivan stated: "The closure of this facility, combined with a growing list of other protein plants that have shuttered across our industry, is pushing our country perilously close to the edge in terms of our meat supply. It is impossible to keep our grocery stores stocked if our plants are not running."
The needed response is implementation of hygiene protections within the plants as much as possible, plus stepped-up outreach to workers and their communities. Health authorities, for example, are expanding their virus information outreach to Grand Island's Hispanic community, which provides a large number of the JBS plant's workers.

Such efforts are vital to ensure the proper functioning of the packing sector during this emergency period. The more successful these actions are, the better for workers, American consumers and Midlands ag producers.

OWH Midlands Voices: Let's nurture and promote Nebraska's economic innovation

The writer is chairman and CEO of Cquence Health Group, an Aksarben governor and committee chair of the Nebraska Tech Collaborative.

Many Nebraskans were likely surprised to see the University of Nebraska Medical Center featured in the likes of the New York Times, Esquire and CNN for its groundbreaking research and quarantine efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps you can attribute this to our humble Midwestern roots, where we're quick to acknowledge the work of others and yet downplay the exciting, innovative work accomplished by Nebraska businesses and educational institutions.

It is important that Nebraskans, and those thinking of moving to Nebraska, know of our state's key role in business incubation, architecture, technological development and yes, fighting pandemics. Having a reputation for innovation across a variety of fields greatly enhances our state's ability to recruit and retain talented individuals, the key drivers of the economy who will become our most vital resource as our nation heals from the scars inflicted upon us by the coronavirus.

As committee chair of the Nebraska Tech Collaborative, an Aksarben Foundation workforce initiative, I've seen firsthand the need to keep our best and brightest in state, as well as to showcase the monumental work that has the potential to make Nebraska a magnet for top talent.

If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has emphasized these needs even more. There will soon be a time when we're rebuilding from this tragedy, and every state, Nebraska included, will rely on the most creative among us to restore the jobs pipeline, to develop new ideas that spring into tomorrow's most popular enterprises and to keep the wheels of progress moving thanks to the combined efforts of tech start-ups and industry icons alike.

The coronavirus is a crucible, but it's one our civic-minded business leaders can and should confront by asking a series of questions.

When so many companies are being forced to lay off or furlough workers, how can we use a combination of private and public resources to protect, and even hire, employees while pushing our technologies and our business strategies forward? How can we make sure budding entrepreneurs still have the avenues to create brand-new companies that provide a vital economic engine to our state? And how can we ensure that we use this time to draw a more diverse employee base into the fold, benefiting from their skills and fresh ideas?

Can we recognize that this isn't the time to fall back on the same playbook, but to expand our outreach efforts to previously overlooked communities so that we don't repeat the mistakes of decades past?

Finally, we must make sure the incredible work being done in Nebraska, from UNMC to so many other exceptional endeavors, isn't being overlooked. The state of Nebraska can compete with anyone when it comes to ingenuity, hard work and dedication to our fellow man. This is the time for leaders from all sectors to recommit to our values, for the good of our state and the people within it.

By Mike Cassling

LJS Local View: Bringing Nebraska together

Dear rural Nebraska,
I am reaching out to you in an effort to plant a seed. I am urban and mostly African-American. During this stressful period of disease and viruses, I've had the time to realize more so who I am and who you are.
I have discovered that you and I have so much in common, while ridiculously separated by distance, sometimes color, sometimes race, sometimes political persuasion, my reflection has taught me the truth of the matter. That truth is that we both have the virtue of fertile ground and an abundance of seeds. So, what shall we do?
We both have the challenges of mass unemployment, before and during the virus, minimal and reducing investments in our relative communities, mistaken perceptions about each other, love and faith in God, and we share love of life, family and community in the tragedy of the coronavirus evil. The virus defines us not as rural or urban but only as potential victims. We have survived years of slavery and racism; you have drought, insects and flooding. We both have survived. But we remain together in our preparation to plant our seeds, and we are united in our desire for our seeds to yield a better future.
So, my question is how on earth could we be divided? We have more in common than we have differences, yet we haven't acted like we have more in common. We have wasted so many years and generations relishing in our differences. We have not used our abundance of common seeds.
We've pointed our fingers at each other. We've voted differently. We have exaggerated our differences. Yet when we have come face-to-face, we have seen with our own eyes our commonality, and now, thanks to this horrible virus, we sit at home in our little-bitty silos and realize, "Oh, my God, we have a common humanity. We have so much in common. We are neighbors despite distance, and we are joined by our love of our families, our communities, our state, our Huskers, our corn, our soybeans and our large buildings and abundant busy 'urbanness.'"
Did you know that one of the fastest growing phenomena in urban life is urban gardens? Did you know that we love and adore our elderly? Did you know that we have the uniqueness of having international cultures within our grasp? I say, during this time, we should pick up our respective plows and plant the seeds of togetherness, unity and a bright future.
The time has come for Nebraskans, rural and urban, to come together and fight for communities' needed capital and resources for now and for future. Fight separate, we lose. Someone once said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Failure on either side will be failure for both sides. We need each other. Let's plant and let's yield together, forever.
Sincerely,
Your Urban Neighbor
Preston Love Jr. is founder and CEO of Black Votes Matter Institute of Community Engagement and adjunct professor in the Black Studies Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
Correction
This column has been updated to correct that the email from Sen. Adam Morfeld and the Nebraska Democratic Party was not a fundraising effort. Additionally, it has been updated to clarify that any information on Hendrix offered by Morfeld came from public social media posts.

GII: Wrong approach taken against the coronavirus

We, Sen. Steve Erdman (LD47) and Sen. Steve Halloran (LD33), have received numerous emails, phone calls and text messages concerning the coronavirus. They are all very similar in nature. The

details may change a little, but the message is usually the same: “If these restrictions continue, my business will close and never reopen.”

Cattlemen and feedlot operators share with us their stories about not being able to sell their fattened cattle, and when they do get an offer, they usually lose more than $500 per head.

In this article we will share with you some revolutionary information about how to deal with viruses, including the coronavirus. This information will be difficult for many to accept, but it is the truth. We regret that fear and panic have directed our policies in the past, but a fundamental change is now needed in how we deal with the coronavirus. There is a way back to normalcy, but it does not include waiting for a vaccine, shutting down schools and businesses, and doling out another stimulus package.

We may, by the end of the year, look back and see that influenza has killed more people than COVID-19. While that fact remains to be seen, our nation’s leading experts on COVID-19 are beginning to say similar things. For instance, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stated last week, “Although one of the original models projected 100,000 to 200,000 deaths…those numbers are going to be downgraded.” The original models used by Dr. Fauci were flawed because they already had mitigation measures factored into them. To be sure, the Act Now model and the IHME model, which are both based on U.S. data, instead of overseas data, now predict the final death toll to be somewhere around 61,000 deaths.

Because these new U.S. models are downgrading the projected death toll, the question is now being asked about whether federal, state and local governments overreacted to the threat of the coronavirus. One such person is Alex Berenson, a Yale graduate and former pharmaceutical reporter for the New York Times. Before the new U.S. models were released last week, Berenson Tweeted, “This isn’t complicated. The models don’t work. The hospitals are empty. WHY ARE WE STILL TALKING ABOUT LOCKDOWNS?”

An early-on, more targeted approach to combating the coronavirus would have been a better approach for the country to take rather than the lockdowns that the current mitigation policy calls for. For instance, isolating those individuals who are most at risk, banning large gatherings, and concentrating our efforts on hot spots, such as New York City, are three things which could have been done while the rest of the country continued to go to work and school. Instead, the lockdowns have devastated our economy, set our students back, and made the cure worse than the disease.

The genie has now been let out of the bottle, and there is no way to get her back in. Another ardent critic of the current mitigation policy is Dr. Knutt Wittkowski, former head of the Department of Biostatistics, Epidemiology and Research Design at the Rockefeller University in New York City. Wittkowski exposed the fact that both China and South Korea had already reached their peak numbers of cases before they began implementing their mitigation procedures. In effect, nature had already run its course before these two countries began their new mitigation policies.

Wittkowski said flattening the curve is the wrong way to defeat the coronavirus, because it only prolongs the inevitable. According to Wittkowski, “With all respiratory diseases, the only thing that stops the disease is herd immunity.”

Herd immunity is achieved by allowing those who are less vulnerable in society to interact with the disease. According to Wittkowski, approximately 80 percent of the population needs to come into contact with the virus before herd immunity can be achieved. The population as a whole must develop its own immunity to the coronavirus. Few of these individuals will ever experience symptoms worthy of hospitalization because they lack the preconditions for a serious illness. However, by keeping schools, hospitals and businesses open, but separating the elderly and those

with certain medical conditions, herd immunity can be achieved and the coronavirus defeated in about four weeks. As Wittkowski said about the coronavirus, "… it will go on forever unless we let it go."

We agree with Wittkowski's analysis. The coronavirus will continue to spread across the country, despite our feeble attempts to try to contain it. Herd immunity is the only way to defeat COVID-19 once and for all. Moreover, the current mitigation policies have led to 13 percent unemployment, a 5,000 point drop in the Dow Jones Industrial Average, a potential 40 percent drop in the GDP, and a $2 trillion dollar bailout package from the Federal Reserve. Ian Goldin, an economist with the New York Times warned us back on March 16 that the U.S. economy would never be able to survive the coronavirus, and he was right.

If Nebraska continues to operate within its current mitigation policy, civil unrest will eventually ensue. All life is sacred and valuable, but Nebraskans also need to re-open their businesses, go back to work, go back to school, and get the elective surgeries they need. What better time to get elective surgery and recuperate than while businesses are shut down? But, we cannot afford to go another day with this current failed policy. Historically, civilized societies have crumbled from failed economies, leaving them vulnerable to attack from enemies, but they did not dissipate from diseases. You may not agree with our analysis, but we believe this is the conversation we should now be having.

Sen. Steve Halloran of Hastings represents District 33 and Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard represents District 47 in the Nebraska Legislature.

AP: As nations talk of reopening, health officials fear flare-ups

WASHINGTON (AP) — New York's coronavirus death toll topped 10,000 even as the lack of fresh hot spots in the U.S. or elsewhere in the world yielded a ray of optimism and fueled discussions Monday about how some places might begin to reopen.

The brunt of the disease has been felt most heavily in New York, Italy, France, Spain and the United Kingdom, but grim projections of a virus that would spread with equal ferocity to other corners of America and the world have not yet materialized after more than a month of measures meant to blunt its impact. Even so, the worldwide death toll surpassed 2 million Monday.

The death toll in populous states such as Florida and Pennsylvania was on par with some individual counties outside New York City. Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city and a hub for immigrant communities and business travelers in the energy industry, has been largely spared compared to other parts of the U.S. As Colorado deaths surpassed 300 Monday, Gov. Jared Polis compared that figure to New York's thousands and called it "a tragic indication of our success in Colorado."

Officials around the world worried that halting quarantine and social-distancing measures could easily undo the hard-earned progress that those steps have achieved in slowing the spread.

Still, there were signs that countries were looking in that direction. Spain permitted some workers to return to their jobs, while a hard-hit region of Italy loosened its lockdown restrictions. Governors on both coasts of the U.S. announced that they would join forces to come up with a coordinated reopening plan at some point, setting the stage for a potential conflict with President Donald Trump, who asserted that he is the ultimate decision-maker for determining how and when to reopen.

Trump continued those assertions during an afternoon White House briefing Monday, pushing back against reporters' questions about whether the president or governors have the authority to ease the restrictions. He said that his administration has "a very good relationship" with the governors but

that "the federal government has absolute power" in that decision-making process if it chooses to exercise it.
Trump can use his bully pulpit to pressure states to act or threaten them with consequences, but the Constitution gives public health and safety responsibilities primarily to state and local officials.
Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat, said, "Seeing how we had the responsibility for closing the state down, I think we probably have the primary responsibility for opening it up."
Wolf joined governors in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware and Rhode Island in agreeing to coordinate their actions. The governors of California, Oregon and Washington announced a similar pact. While each state is building its own plan, the three West Coast states have agreed to a framework under which they will work together, put their residents' health first and let science guide their decisions.
At Monday's briefing, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said he expects more than 80 million Americans will have tax rebates directly deposited into their bank accounts by Wednesday. Under the program, single filers will receive $1,200 and joint filers $2,400, though the payments phase out at higher incomes. The rebates are aimed at boosting the economy as the country responds to the coronavirus.
New York saw a few positive signs Monday even as it reached another bleak milestone. It marked the first time in a week that the daily toll dipped below 700. Almost 2,000 people were newly hospitalized with the virus Sunday, though once discharges and deaths were accounted for, the number of people hospitalized has flattened to just under 19,000.
"This virus is very good at what it does. It is a killer," Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Monday.
In the U.S., about half of the more than 22,000 deaths reported are in the New York metropolitan area. Meanwhile, tracking maps maintained by Johns Hopkins University showed a dense patchwork of coronavirus cases along the Northeast corridor, as well as significant outbreaks corresponding to other major metropolitan areas — though nothing on the scale of what New York has endured.
Houston's 18 total deaths since the start of the outbreak make up a tiny fraction of the one-day toll in New York City, prompting Mayor Sylvester Turner to say the city was achieving its goal of slowing "the progression of this virus so that our health care delivery system would not be overwhelmed."
Dr. Sebastian Johnston, a professor of respiratory medicine at Imperial College London, said it appeared that COVID-19 had peaked in much of Europe, including France, Spain, Germany, Italy and the U.K. He was worried the virus might now start to take off in countries across Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia. There's also concern about Russia.
Hot spots may yet emerge as states lift stay-at-home orders, said Dr. Christopher Murray, director of the University of Washington institute that created widely cited projections of virus-related deaths. He pointed to states where the number of COVID-19 cases is still climbing: Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Texas and Florida.
"Don't consider relaxing social distancing in the near term," Murray said he'd advise leaders in those states. "You need to stay the course."
To date, infections in some areas of the U.S. have taken off like sparks starting fires, while others have sputtered out. Trevor Bedford, whose lab at Seattle's Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center has been tracking the pandemic using the virus's genetic code, acknowledges it's a "dice roll" that makes it hard to predict hot spots.
And when restrictions are eased, people will not immediately dive back into their social connections, at least not without precautions, Bedford said.
A study released Monday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, relying on data from

mobile devices in New Orleans, New York City, San Francisco and Seattle, suggested that social-distancing policies prompted more people to stay at home in March and probably curbed spread of the virus.
Researchers say people increasingly left their devices, and themselves, at home as cities, states and the federal government adopted increasingly restrictive closures and social distancing policies.
The report "provides some very early indications that these measures might help slow the spread of COVD-19," the authors said.
In some European countries, officials pointed to positive signs as they began prepping for the reopening of largely shuttered economies and industries.
Italian authorities said Monday that the 3,153 new coronavirus cases were the fewest in weeks.. The daily death toll of 566, however, was up from the 431 new deaths registered on Sunday.
Slightly eased restrictions were about to take effect in some parts of Italy, such as allowing stores selling necessities for newborns to reopen.
The hard-hit Veneto region, which has been credited with a rapid response to the virus that has helped limit the number of fatalities. is entering a phase the governor, Luca Zaia, termed ''lockdown light.''
Zaia is allowing residents to go venture about 200 yards from home for physical fitness and permitting open-air markets, under a new ordinance taking effect Tuesday. The ordinance makes masks or other face coverings mandatory everywhere outside the home.

AP: Sailor dies of virus; a spit test shows promise; 50th state has a death

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Navy says an aircraft carrier crew member who was hospitalized in intensive care on the island of Guam last week has died of what officials called COVID-19-related complications.
The sailor was among nearly 600 crewmembers of the USS Theodore Roosevelt to have tested positive for the new coronavirus.
In announcing the death on Monday, the Navy said the sailor had been found "unresponsive" during an April 9 medical check while in isolation on Guam. The Navy said fellow sailors and an onsite medical team at the house in which the sailor was staying administered CPR.
The Navy says the sailor was then moved to an intensive care unit at a local hospital. It did not identify the sailor.
The Roosevelt aircraft carrier pulled into port at Guam on March 27, shortly after the first coronavirus cases on board were detected.
The Roosevelt has been in a coronavirus crisis that prompted the Navy's civilian leader, Thomas Modly, to fire the ship's captain on April 2. Five days later, after having flown to the ship and delivered a speech in which he insulted the skipper, Capt. Brett E. Crozier, and criticized the crew for supporting Crozier, Modly resigned.

FINAL STATE

A Wyoming man has become the state's first person to die of the coronavirus.
For almost two weeks, Wyoming was the only U.S. state without known deaths from the virus causing the COVID-19 illness. The Johnson County man's death was announced Monday by the Wyoming Department of Health.
Theman had health conditions that put him at higher risk of complications from the virus.

A SPIT TEST

Rutgers University researchers have received U.S. government clearance for the first saliva test to help diagnose COVID-19, a new approach that could help expand testing options and reduce risks of infection for health care workers.

The Food and Drug Administration authorized the test under its emergency powers to quickly clear new tests and therapies to fight the outbreak, the New Jersey university said Monday. The test initially will be available through hospitals and clinics affiliated with the school.

The current approach to screening for COVID-19 requires health care workers to take a swab from a patient's nose or throat. With the new saliva-based test, patients are given a plastic tube into which they spit several times. They then hand the tube back to the health care worker for laboratory processing.

13 FEET

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, new research of air samples of hospitals with coronavirus patients found the virus can travel up to 13 feet.

The researchers, from the Academy of Military Medical Sciences in Beijing, tested surface and air samples from hospital units that housed coronavirus patients in Wuhan between Feb. 19 and March 2.

The highest concentrations of the virus were on floors, doorknobs, bed rails and trash cans.

The researchers also found that small concentrations virus-laden aerosols could remain suspended in the air as far as 13 feet away from the infected person. It it not confirmed that the virus is being spread through aerosols.

The new study was published Friday in Emerging Infectious Diseases, a CDC journal.

IMMUNITY

Scientists at the World Health Organization say they still do not have enough information to know if people are immune to subsequent COVID-19 infections once they have recovered from the disease.

At a briefing on Monday, WHO emergencies chief Dr. Mike Ryan said that they assume people who have survived the new coronavirus and have a detectable level of antibodies should have some level of protection, but that "we just don't know what that period of time is."

He said scientists can make estimates based on immunity from other coronaviruses, but that even that data is quite limited.

BRITAIN

The British government's chief scientific adviser has warned that the U.K.'s daily death toll from coronavirus will likely rise this week before plateauing for potentially two to three weeks, and then subsequently declining.

Patrick Vallance said at the government's daily press briefing that the U.K. is tracking behind Italy, the European country with the highest death toll from COVID-19, and "following the same sort of path."

MEXICO

Health workers briefly blocked a street in Mexico City on Monday to demand more protective gear as their hospital receives more patients suffering from COVID-19.

Dozens of nurses, doctors and other personnel from the October 1 Hospital carried handwritten signs and shouted for assistance.

AP: Coronavirus relief starts to flow to small businesses; more than 941,000 loans OK'd so far

NEW YORK (AP) — The flow of money to small businesses under the government's $349 billion coronavirus relief plan is picking up momentum, although many company owners are still waiting. Money that was held up by technological and legal problems and the sheer volume of applications began arriving in companies' bank accounts at the end of last week. The Small Business Administration reported Monday afternoon that more than 941,000 applications had been approved for over $226 billion from the Paycheck Protection loan program.

The money Amy Power received will go toward paying the eight staffers of her Dallas-based public relations company. Revenue is down more than 12% at The Power Group, whose clients include restaurants hit by the virus outbreak.

"I want to get through this and retain my people," Power said.

The loans of up to $10 million at an interest rate of 1% carry the promise of forgiveness if the money is used for retaining staffers or rehiring those who have been laid off. They also can be used for rent, mortgage interest and utilities.

Senators made no progress Monday on coming up with a spending package to shore up funding for the loan program.

The Paycheck Protection program so far hasn't lived up to expectations raised by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who said in announcing the program that owners could get loan money the same day they applied. But neither the SBA nor banks could turn around hundreds of thousands of loans in a matter of days, let alone hours.

The money was arriving as the first economic impact payments under the government's $2 trillion relief package were starting to land in Americans' bank accounts. Any adult earning up to $75,000 in adjusted gross income who has a valid Social Security number will receive a $1,200 payment.

Monday, April 13, 2020

TV and Radio

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KETV: 'We're taking every step possible to stop the spread of the coronavirus,' NE Corrections Director says
KLKN: NCDHH insures the deaf community has signing for COVID-19 briefings
WOWT: Papillion hotel helps medical staff find rest during pandemic
NCN: Senior care facilities put out plea for temporary workers
NET: Part Of Medicaid Expansion Delayed; Frakes And Ricketts Argue Against Early Prison Releases
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OWH: Gov. Ricketts, election chief confident Nebraska primary won't be repeat of Wisconsin

This week, the world watched as Wisconsin voters stood for hours in long lines to cast ballots during a pandemic.

Nebraska is next in line May 12, when polling places open for the state's primary election. Officials are pressing Nebraskans to vote early by mail, but they still expect thousands to head to the polls on Election Day.

The Cornhusker State remains an outlier by proceeding as scheduled with in-person voting. At last count, 16 states had postponed primaries due to COVID-19.

Nebraska Democratic Party chairwoman Jane Kleeb criticized the state for moving forward with in-person voting, calling the decision "reckless."

"We shouldn't put us in the position of Wisconsin, where we have to make a late decision (about voting) and there is confusion," Kleeb said.

Gov. Pete Ricketts said late Friday afternoon that Nebraskans have voted through wars and previous pandemics. The state is not going to disenfranchise voters, he said. It will let them vote. State Republican Party leaders agreed.

Secretary of State Bob Evnen said Nebraska will not face the same fate as Wisconsin.

Nebraska has a month longer to prepare and faces no similar confusion from state leaders about

whether its May election will happen.
Wisconsin scrambled to staff and open polling places after the state's conservative-led Supreme Court declined to delay the election, despite a stay-at-home order and changes sought by the state's Democratic governor.
In Nebraska, most of the state's regular polling sites will be open and staffed, Evnen said. Part of Wisconsin's problems on Tuesday involved its need, at the last second, to condense polling sites serving towns the size of Grand Island into one or two sites.
"That's not going to happen here," Evnen said.
A big reason: Nebraska's county clerks and election commissioners have been working diligently to recruit the three-plus poll workers each precinct needs, he said.
In addition, Ricketts and Evnen are asking as many people as possible to vote by mail.
The State of Nebraska, following efforts by Douglas, Sarpy and Lancaster Counties, has mailed every registered voter in all 93 counties an application to request a mail-in ballot.
About 200,000 registered Nebraskans have already responded with ballot requests, Evnen said. That puts the state on pace for a high-turnout primary, from home.
In Douglas County alone, more people have requested ballots this year than have voted in any Omaha-area primary election on record, Election Commissioner Brian Kruse said.
"The numbers are indicating that the vast majority of individuals are going to be voting by mail," Kruse said. "It is our hope that it's a very, very quiet Election Day at the polls."
Nebraska also has the ability under state law to draft poll workers, just as it can draft jurors for jury duty. No other state has that power, based on legal research by the National Conference of State Legislatures, spokesman Matt Bullock said.
Drafted poll workers make up nearly half of the 1,400 people needed for a typical primary in Douglas County. The rest sign up to help. Kruse expects a similar split this year.
Before COVID-19 hit, Sarpy County had already decided to draft poll workers for the first time in years, said Michelle Andahl, Sarpy's election commissioner. The growing county needed more help, she said, so it sent notices in early March to roughly 100 people.
Sarpy expects to need about 500 workers to staff polling sites in places like Papillion, La Vista, Bellevue and Gretna, she said.
Counties across the state are asking people to sign up to be poll workers because as many as 1 in 3 poll workers are bowing out in some locations, The World-Herald has learned.
Retiree Bob Monaco has been a poll worker for a quarter-century. But this May, Monaco won't report to the Bellevue polling place near Fontenelle Forest where he regularly worked.
The 80-year-old has an autoimmune disorder, the kind of secondary health condition that public health experts say puts him at greater risk of the novel coronavirus.
"We want to be real careful about preserving the right to vote," Monaco said. "By the same token, it's tough to put yourself at risk for such a devastating illness."
Evnen said he's hopeful most counties won't have to draft poll workers because Nebraskans are looking for ways to help their neighbors.
"This is an opportunity for us to begin developing the next generation of poll workers," Evnen said.
State and local election officials are pushing for help from younger, healthy poll workers, and many officials say they are seeing a bumper crop of first-time volunteers.
One of those new poll workers is Elkhorn-area resident Isabelle Lu, an 18-year-old freshman psychology major who is home from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
Her mom mentioned the state was looking for poll workers to help replace people from more

vulnerable groups, including the elderly and those with health conditions.
Lu contacted the Douglas County Election Commission and found out how to apply and train as a poll worker online. This May, she will work at an Omaha polling site.
“It makes me feel really proud,” Lu said. “It’s a reminder that the younger generation and the younger people have more importance than some people say they do.”
Poll workers are protected under state and federal law from having to use sick or vacation time to participate. Most will work a long day, from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., officials said.
Nebraska pays its poll workers at least an hourly minimum wage. Potential volunteers can contact their local county’s election office, officials say.
But not everybody has a choice of whether to serve.
One of the people summoned this year was Gretna resident Andy Herrmann, 37, who sells medical equipment for cancer patients. He said most times he would be happy to help.
But during a global pandemic, Herrmann faced a choice between serving and risking his family’s health, or not serving and facing a possible misdemeanor conviction.
Herrmann helps care for his father-in-law, who is recovering from surgery for oral cancer. He brings him groceries, helps him up when he falls, he said.
“I think the importance and need to hold timely elections is universally recognized,” he said. “But that need does not supersede a person’s right to safety and health.”
State law gives county election officials some latitude to release drafted poll workers due to ill health or for another good reason.
Herrmann said he learned from Sarpy election officials on Friday that his service would be deferred to a future election.
Evnen said the state will provide poll workers with safety kits, including N95 masks, gloves, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes. Monaco, the longtime poll worker, said he’s impressed with the efforts being made.
But for Herrmann, the state kits don’t comfort him. They confirm the risk.
“The act of supplying the kit is an admission that the work will not be safe,” Herrmann said.
He said he’d like the state to do one of three things: postpone the primary election, move it to all mail or drop-off, or remove the legal requirement that people work the polls.
Ricketts, through spokesman Taylor Gage, said Friday that he has no plans to waive the poll worker draft statute and he supports the secretary of state’s work.
Michael Cich-Jones, who oversees Douglas County’s election board, acknowledged poll workers’ anxiety, but said people who don’t vote by mail should have the opportunity to vote in person.
Election leaders said they are still discussing how best to preserve public health at the polls. Among the steps expected: putting voting booths at least 6 feet apart, cleaning voting stations between uses and marking places on the floor for voters to stand.
Kleeb said the state, if it’s determined to hold the May 12 primary, should consider other options, including working with local banks to offer drive-thru voting or expanding curbside voting beyond the elderly and people with disabilities.
Douglas County Health Director Adi Pour said Friday that she would prefer voting by mail but said she understands the importance of in-person voting. She stopped short of calling in-person voting a public health concern.
Nebraska election officials say they expect a much better situation than in Wisconsin.
Nebraska plans to move or consolidate only a handful of polling places, mainly to accommodate requests by hosts that sites be moved and to address public health concerns, officials said.

For example, polling sites will move out of senior centers and public housing towers to nearby schools, which are closed, and churches. One new site will be Omaha South High School.
Schools and most other public facilities are required under state law to allow voting. Churches volunteer to serve as polling sites.
“I think we’re going to have an orderly, successful, fair and secure election,” Evnen said. “Our voters will be protected, and so will our poll workers, and we’re going to be proud of our state.”
By Aaron Sanderford

OWH: No stay-at-home order? Nebraska still rates well in coronavirus cases and deaths

Critics see Nebraska's lack of a stay-at-home order as a sign that it isn't doing enough to combat coronavirus, but a World-Herald analysis finds that its results stack up well against other states.
The comparison of all 50 states shows that only two have fewer confirmed cases per capita of COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.
While Nebraska ranks quite low in testing for the disease, it also has a low per-capita death rate from cononavirus — 40th in the nation. And Nebraska is doing better than nearly all of its neighbors in deaths and cases.
Gov. Pete Ricketts said he thinks the state-by-state data examined by The World-Herald shows that critics misunderstand the extent and effectiveness of what Nebraska state and local public health officials, employers and individual citizens have done to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
Many don’t realize, for example, that kids in Nebraska’s two largest school districts have been out of classes longer than those in New York City.
Or that Nebraska was one of the very first states to adopt federal guidance limiting the size of gatherings.
Or that when you get down to the specifics, there really is not much difference between what Nebraska and many states with so-called “stay-at-home” orders are doing to flatten the deadly coronavirus growth curve.
At the same time, Ricketts said, the favorable statistics don't mean that the state should ease off. As he has on a near-daily basis for weeks, the governor continued to stress the need for Nebraskans to heed social distancing strictures and guidance in the critical weeks ahead.
“People need to stay home,” Ricketts said. “Even if the numbers appear to look good for us now, we do not want to take that for granted. Everyone really, really needs to stay home.”
The early pandemic statistics also don’t change the view of those who feel Ricketts needs to do more.
State Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha believes it would send a strong and meaningful message to Nebraskans if the governor handed down a formal, legal edict declaring that everyone should just stay at home. That could be what it takes for some Nebraskans to alter their risky, carefree behavior — and potentially save lives.
“If the governor says he is issuing a stay-at-home order, that’s something everyone in the country can understand,” Hunt said. “At this point, I think it’s both a psychological and practical need to emphasize how critical it is that we not fill up the stores and parks and go to each other’s houses.”
Ricketts and Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds both have faced local and national criticism for not enacting stay-at-home or “shelter-in-place” executive orders.
Even as 90 percent of the nation’s population has fallen under such orders, the two have been among a handful of Republican governors who have continued to resist.

Ricketts has insisted the unique approach Nebraska has taken to flatten the growth curve and keep hospitals from being overwhelmed is the right one for the state.
Following a plan drafted by pandemic experts, Ricketts moved early on to limit public gatherings to no more than 10 people. Since then, he has rolled out a series of county-by-county orders called directed health measures as the virus has spread across the state.
All of the state's 93 counties are now under those measures. Bars and restaurants, for example, are limited to takeout only. Schools are closed. Anyone showing symptoms must quarantine at home. Some counties under such measures have offered additional restrictions of their own.
Dr. Anthony Fauci, the federal government's top infectious disease expert and key adviser to the White House on the pandemic, last weekend said he could not understand why all states have not issued stay-at-home orders.
But after a conversation with Ricketts and Reynolds Monday, Fauci declared he was satisfied that what's been adopted in Nebraska and Iowa is functionally equivalent to what's happening in other states.
"I think there was a public response that they weren't really doing anything at all, and they really are doing a very good job," Fauci said during a White House briefing. "I want to make sure people understand that just because they don't have a strict stay-at-home order, they have in place a lot of things that are totally compatible with what everyone else is doing."
So is Fauci right? Has Nebraska's response been just as strong as that of most other states?
A number of states certainly have taken more robust actions than Nebraska, particularly hard-hit states such as New York, where hospitals are under siege and ventilators in short supply.
But many of the stay-at-home orders around the country do not put residents in those places under some kind of state-imposed lockdown.
Many such orders include significant exemptions for a variety of activities and "critical" industries, and some include provisions that are looser than Nebraska's. For example:

Churches

In Kansas, the stay-at-home order exempted church services and funerals. After at least three outbreak clusters were tied to churches in the state, Gov. Laura Kelly this week tried to extend the order to cover religious services. Then state legislators moved to block her and the issue wound up in the courts.
In Nebraska, nearly a month ago Ricketts, a devout Catholic, specified that his 10-person limit on gatherings applied to funerals and church services.

Businesses

Missouri Gov. Mike Parson received credit nationally for issuing a stay-at-home order this past week, but he made it clear that all businesses could remain open if they followed social distancing.
Minnesota's March 26 "stay at home" executive order signed by Gov. Tim Walz lists nine pages of exemptions, including getting food or medical care, but also enjoying the outdoors and going out to buy liquor. The state's labor commissioner estimated 78 percent of the state's workers fall under the critical industries exempt from the order, such as construction and trades, food and agriculture, real estate, insurance, even a specific exemption for iron ore mining.
California and Colorado even issue exemptions for recreational marijuana shops.

Enforcement

Some states that have issued such orders have also provided no grounds to enforce them, governors saying they're counting on citizens to voluntarily follow the directives.
In Nebraska, enforcement is generally a local decision, with law enforcement officers in Douglas

County handing out tickets for violations. Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert has also been publicly calling out stores where too many people have been allowed to gather, and she last week shut down all city parks when too few people were heeding social distancing within them.

Functionally, what's happening to stop coronavirus in Nebraska indeed appears to be generally not much different than what's happening in many states across the country.

Both here and elsewhere, most public places like restaurants, bars, theaters, health clubs and salons are closed to the public. Stores are generally open. Takeout food is allowed. People can go outdoors. Most people can go do their jobs but are encouraged to work from home. Almost everywhere, the message is that people should just stay home.

But analytics data taken from cell phones also suggest Nebraska's success in reducing movement have lagged what's happened nationally. Recent Google data shows work-related travel is down 27% in Nebraska from its pre-pandemic baseline compared to a 40% reduction nationally.

A cell phone data analysis by the New York Times showed travel in Douglas County was not down as much as in most other counties of 500,000 or more population nationwide. Some rural Nebraska counties in the analysis showed no travel reductions at all.

That analysis also found a correlation between reduced travel and states with stay-at-home orders.

State Sen. Adam Morfeld of Lincoln said overall he thinks Ricketts has been doing a good job of directing the state's response to the pandemic.

But he said it would be valuable to have the governor issue a stay-at-home order. While many Nebraskans might not know what a "directed health measure" is, they do understand what it means when the governor orders them to stay put.

"Words matter," Morfeld said. "I think when people hear 'stay at home' order, it's more clear what our leaders want us to do, and they take it more seriously."

Dr. Phil Boucher, a Lincoln pediatrician who has campaigned on Facebook to get Ricketts to issue a stay-at-home order, said he gets concerned when he sees the volume of people in Nebraska going about their business during the pandemic.

A stay-at-home order would address that, he said. In the public's mind, he likened it to the difference between a tornado watch and a tornado warning.

"Right now, we are on coronavirus watch when we should be sounding the alarm," he said. "(Ricketts) is making it seem like it's less severe than it is."

Ricketts certainly would dispute that. He has preached for weeks during his daily press briefings that this is a significant public health emergency. April is going to be a tough and critical month, he has warned, and Nebraskans must follow directives and go out as little as possible.

Overall, the governor said, Nebraskans have shown "really good compliance."

Just over one month after Nebraska's first reported coronavirus case, statistics on the outbreak suggest most people here are taking heed.

"The data we can see looks encouraging," said Dr. James Lawler, a pandemic disease expert at the University of Nebraska Medical Center who was asked to look at the World-Herald's state-by-state analysis. "I think overall we're in pretty good shape compared to other states and our neighbors."

Among the 50 states, Nebraska ranks 48th in coronavirus cases per million residents, with only Minnesota and West Virginia posting lower figures.

Nebraska's case numbers certainly are influenced by the fact that so few residents are being tested, Lawler cautioned. The state ranks only 43rd in its rate of coronavirus testing and has had difficulty obtaining supplies to do more, particularly chemical agents needed to conduct the tests.

"We don't have perfect visibility into what's going on," said Lawler, a director in UNMC's Global

Center for Health Security who helped draft the pandemic plan that Ricketts has followed. He came to UNMC in 2018 after a Navy career in biodefense that included White House assignments dealing with biodefense, pandemic response and health preparedness.

But low testing isn't the only reason why Nebraska's numbers look good. Testing lags in many places across the country. While the national testing rate is 60% higher than Nebraska's, the national rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases is 370% higher.

Nebraska's low virus rate is also likely helped by its wide swaths of rural land, although those outside the state who see Nebraska as fly-over country would be surprised to learn that two-thirds of the state's population lives in metropolitan areas.

"I think population density is a factor in spread of the epidemic," Lawler said. "They just have more social mixing in Manhattan than you do in Ainsworth, Nebraska."

Ricketts and Lawler said it's possible Nebraska's early actions helped flatten the state's coronavirus curve.

After its first confirmed case on March 6, Nebraska for most of two weeks had more coronavirus cases per capita than the neighboring states of Iowa, Kansas, South Dakota and Missouri.

On March 16, Nebraska limited gatherings to 10 people — the same day it was recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The move overnight had the effect of shutting the doors to most bars and restaurants. Ricketts had actually three days earlier been among the nation's first governors to set any kind of gathering limit, having declared a 250-person limit March 13.

Iowa's Reynolds also acted quickly on the 10-person limit, endorsing the federal guidance the day after its issue.

Conversely, Missouri, Kansas and South Dakota all waited a week or more to implement it. Experts say such inaction can be critical early in outbreaks, allowing the virus to spread unchecked.

As the month continued, Nebraska's trend line became less steep while those in Iowa, Missouri, Kansas and South Dakota began to spike up sharply. By late March, Nebraska's per-capita caseload trailed all of its neighboring states and for a time became the lowest in the country.

Ricketts said it also helped that when Nebraska saw its first case, the state's largest school districts were out on spring break, and their leaders never resumed classes. Students in the Omaha Public Schools and Lincoln Public Schools have actually been out of classes a week longer than students in New York City.

Despite the early success, Ricketts says he's closely watching the daily count of new cases to see how the state is trending. Daily new cases hovered around 50 for most of the past week before hitting a new high of 71 on Friday.

"They are not going up at a geometric rate right now, and that's really one of the keys," he said.

Death rates also support the notion that Nebraska to date is faring relatively well.

Ricketts said anyone in a Nebraska hospital with pneumonia from an unknown source is being tested for coronavirus. If they test positive and subsequently die, they're included in the count.

Nebraska's death rate per million population is in the bottom fourth among the states. The national rate is six times as high. Among Nebraska's six neighboring states, only Wyoming, which has yet to record a death, and South Dakota have lower rates.

Still, Lawler noted that death is a lagging measure — people tend to die two to three weeks after initial infection. Looking only at deaths can hide the extent the disease is spreading in the community.

While Nebraska stood at 15 deaths as of Friday morning, a University of Washington model that's being watched around the country was projecting the state to have nearly 300 deaths by the time

the pandemic peaks in late April and then runs its initial course by early June. That's down from almost 450 deaths the model was projecting a week earlier.
Lawler said there's no way to know at this point how accurate that projection is. Models are useful tools in a pandemic, he said, but they don't have all the answers.
One state that particularly stands out in the World-Herald analysis is Minnesota.
That state about a week ago passed Nebraska as the state with the nation's lowest rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases. And its rate has continued to level off to the point it's now more than 25% below Nebraska and West Virginia, the next closest states. Minnesota's death rate is slightly higher than Nebraska's.
Ryan Demmer, an associate professor of public health at the University of Minnesota, said the numbers could support the notion that early efforts in Nebraska and Minnesota have made a difference in flattening the curve.
He was particularly interested that Nebraska's largest school districts ceased classes before schools in New York City, saying that extra week "would be pretty powerful" in slowing infection spread.
Demmer also agreed with those who believe a stay-at-home order like the one issued in his own state could pack more punch than similar measures under another name.
"There is power in receiving a message like that," he said. "I think there is a psychology to a state-level pronouncement."
For his own part, Ricketts last week continued to reject issuing a stay-at-home order. But while he's largely sticking to the state's plan, he made some notable changes.
He expanded the requirements for counties under the state's directed health measures. In doing so, he projected statewide some additional requirements that Douglas County and others had already adopted locally, among them closing any salons and tattoo parlors that had remained open and shutting down group sports.
His messaging also changed, as he formalized his stay-at-home message with a new promotional slogan to "Stay home, stay healthy, stay connected." It's one that is also being used by governors in other states.
And while he didn't sign an executive order, he put his name to a ceremonial proclamation urging Nebraskans to buckle down in the coming weeks as the virus is projected to peak. He declared April 10 to 30 to be "21 Days to Stay Home and Stay Healthy."
"This is not a shelter in place," Ricketts made clear. "This is about asking Nebraskans to do what's right."
By Henry J. Cordes

Kearney Hub: Central Nebraska Veterans' Home member among five new COVID-19 cases

HOLDREGE — A veteran at the Central Nebraska Veterans' Home in Kearney is among five new cases of COVID-19 that were reported today by the Two Rivers Public Health Department.
The veteran, a resident of Buffalo County, is isolated in a private room. Members at the four state veterans homes have been completing daily screenings and having temperatures taken to check for COVID-19 symptoms, said Holden Armstrong, a veteran's affairs spokesperson.
Staff and other members who may have previously come into contact with the positive member are now being screened and tested. All staff working in the home where the member resides are donning N95 masks, gowns, and face shields.

Staff throughout the rest of the facility are masked per CDC and DHHS long-term care facility guidelines.

"We have been taking COVID-19 very seriously and have implemented policies, procedures, and additional training in all four of our veterans homes to protect our members and teammates," said John Hilgert, veteran's affairs director.

Since March 11, entry to all the verteran's home was limited to staff and medical professionals, who are required to complete a screening upon entry. A "virtual visitor" system has been put in place to keep families connected while access for in-person visits is limited.

All non-essential travel outside the facility was postponed and communal dining has been discontinued.

Three other confirmed cases are men from Dawson County. Two are in their 60s and one is in his 40s. All are isolating at home. The fifth case, a Buffalo County woman in her 40s, is also isolating at her home.

Two Rivers is investigating these cases in partnership with the state Department of Health and Human Services and the Nebraska Department of Veterans Affairs. Additional close contacts are being screened. Additional testing is possible.

This brings the number of cases of COVID-19 to 46 in the seven-county Two Rivers area. Only Harlan County has no reported cases. Current totals by county are:

- Buffalo: 33
- Dawson: 6
- Franklin: 2
- Gosper: 1
- Harlan: 0
- Kearney: 3
- Phelps: 1

One death, that of a Buffalo County man, has been reported since the first case was confirmed March 20.

DHHS has a statewide COVID-19 information line to answer general questions and share the latest information and resources. Call (402) 552-6645 from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week.

For more local information, call Two Rivers at (888) 669-7154 or visit www.trphd.org.

By Mary Jane Skala and Kim Schmidt

OWH: Coronavirus testing in Nebraska has lagged that of some states, but so have cases — and deaths

Nebraska officials have taken some knocks because the state has trailed some neighbors in the number of people who have been tested for the novel coronavirus.

The state ranked 44th among the 50 states and Washington, D.C., on Thursday in the number of tests it had performed per capita, according to a World-Herald analysis of data compiled by the Covid Tracking Project, a volunteer effort of journalists and scientists.

But at the same time, the state ranked 49th in confirmed cases of COVID-19 per capita, and 40th in deaths. Put another way, Nebraska's testing rate stood about 60% below the national rate while confirmed cases were 360% below the national rate.

Iowa, ranked 43rd in per capita testing, was 38th for cases per capita and 35th in deaths.

Undoubtedly, lower rates of testing in Nebraska mean some cases are being missed, contributing to

the state's lower case counts. But deaths and hospitalizations, which denote more serious cases, tell a starker tale. By Friday afternoon, 17 Nebraskans had died from complications of COVID-19.
Forty-three patients with COVID-19 were hospitalized at the end of the day Thursday in the Omaha metropolitan area, which includes Douglas, Sarpy, Saunders, Pottawattamie and Washington Counties. In Nebraska, a total of 102 people have been hospitalized with the disease from February through Thursday, the state said.
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said again in a town hall meeting Thursday night that state officials recognize the need to expand testing.
"No governor feels like they have enough tests for the people in their state," he said, repeating a refrain from recent weeks.
The state initially prioritized high-risk groups, including those hospitalized with symptoms, the elderly and those with underlying health conditions, and those with a history of travel to coronavirus hot spots. Initially, the travel list stopped at China. It later expanded to include all international and Interstate travel. Also added to the list were health care workers, first responders and residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. All, if they became ill, could seed outbreaks that could be difficult to control.
Dr. Mark Rupp, chief of the University of Nebraska Medical Center's infectious diseases division, said that out of necessity, the state has had to reserve and prioritize tests for where they will make the most difference.
By the time health officials get through those lists, few tests are left for the young and healthy. Health officials, he said, would love to know whether all those who report symptoms have the virus.
"But we can't just open the floodgates and test everyone we'd like to," Rupp said.
Nebraska's test numbers have increased significantly in recent weeks as the state's public health laboratory, hospitals and commercial testing companies have ramped up testing.
In the two-week span that ended Wednesday, the total number of tests conducted increased by nearly 5,800. The number jumped again from 8,067 on Wednesday night to 9,474 by Friday evening, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
As Nebraska has ramped up testing, it has been competing with other states for scarce supplies all along the testing pipeline. Ricketts said Thursday that he had been calling manufacturers seeking reagents, the chemicals needed to run the tests. It takes a total of 15 of them.
Working against the state is its relatively low rate of positive tests, which suppliers are considering as they fill orders. Nebraska's rate is about 6.5%, Dr. Gary Anthone, the state's chief medical officer, said in a briefing Thursday. New York's, by comparison, is about 41%, according to the COVID Project data.
Said Rupp, "I'd love to be able to test thousands or tens of thousands a day. But that's just not the reality of the situation on the ground."
Whether tens of thousands of tests eventually will be conducted isn't clear. But state officials can think about beginning to test more of the general population.
"We're now at a phase where more broad testing is appropriate," said Dr. Steven Hinrichs, chairman of UNMC's pathology and microbiology department.
The department includes the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory; a clinical lab jointly operated by UNMC and its clinical partner, Nebraska Medicine; and a research lab. Together, the three labs on the UNMC campus can run between 500 and 600 diagnostic tests a day, Hinrichs said.
CHI Health, which recently launched its own testing, can conduct about 270 a day. Commercial labs also are testing.

Within the past week, Ricketts has deployed the Nebraska National Guard to collect samples for testing from specific groups in areas with flare-ups — Grand Island, Kearney and the Panhandle. Guard members initially swabbed about 150 health care workers and first responders in Grand Island. But local officials announced Thursday that collection would continue through Saturday with the goal of testing 75 people a day.

Hinrichs said the initial goal of testing wasn't to test every Nebraskan with possible symptoms or catch every case of COVID-19. Instead, he said, the intent was to identify at-risk people and strategically reduce the spread of disease.

Only now, he said, is the state at the stage where public health officials can begin to look at broadening testing, which could help find those without symptoms who are spreading the virus. "That's where you begin to turn your resources to that question, after you've absorbed the acute blow of the epidemic," he said.

Officials in Los Angeles this weekend planned to begin to test 1,000 randomly selected residents using one of the new antibody tests that are becoming available, the Washington Post reported. The National Institutes of Health on Friday announced plans to test up to 10,000 volunteers from across the country.

Such "serology" tests look for antibodies in blood that the body produces when it's fighting an infection. While not considered as definitive in diagnosing the disease, they're being eyed as screening tools that could give researchers a better idea of how widely the virus has spread.

One factor initially limiting testing in Nebraska was a shortage of supplies — first the extraction kits used to pull out the virus' genetic material from specimens and then the swabs used to collect the samples from the back of the nose. It's a complex process and requires accuracy from start to finish, starting with properly collecting samples of cells at the back of the nose where the virus may be replicating.

Dr. Jana Broadhurst, director of the Nebraska Biocontainment Unit clinical laboratory, said more than 30 tests that look for the virus' genetic material have received federal approval for emergency use.

But questions about who should be tested have to be balanced with the availability of resources, Broadhurst said. That has varied by state and even within states. Uncertainty around availability of supplies has, in turn, made it difficult to project testing strategies more than a few weeks out.

To help ease the crunch at the medical center, lab teams started making the liquid used to sustain any virus on the swabs until it gets to the lab.

Tethon 3D, an Omaha 3D printing firm, recently shifted its production and began printing swabs. The firm donated 1,000 to the medical center and now is selling them at the cost of producing them, said Karen Linder, the company's CEO.

With the limits on testing, government officials have layered on measures intended to contain the virus and keep hospitals from getting overwhelmed, including asking all but essential workers to stay home, limiting crowds to 10 or fewer and even closing Omaha's parks.

Hinrichs said he understands that people would like to exchange social distancing for wider testing. But that's not a good trade, he said. On a given day, officials could test a group of people and get all negative results. The next day, some of those people could become positive. People who were positive one day also could test negative the next, particularly as they near the end of their illness.

And as with any lab test, he said, health officials also consider whether testing will mean a different course of action for patients. With no treatments approved for COVID-19, those with mild illness have been instructed to isolate and recover at home.

Dr. James Lawler, co-director of the Global Center for Health Security at UNMC, said during Ricketts' town hall Thursday that wider testing will be key to determining when the state can dial down some of the stricter social distancing guidelines now in place.
Testing also is important for understanding how to isolate people, even at home, and to trace and isolate their contacts, moves that will be a mainstay in keeping the disease in check.
Hinrichs said Ricketts has pushed hard to get new, faster testing equipment, a device made by Abbott Laboratories that can produce results — one test at a time — in 15 minutes. Lab personnel still are evaluating its accuracy.
UNMC also is evaluating serological or antibody tests, which would allow officials to determine whether people have been infected in the past and whether they have acquired some immunity. Those, however, probably are about two weeks away. Like the diagnostic tests, they would require a doctor's order.
"Every disease has a progression," Hinrichs said. "You have to do certain things at a certain time."
By Julie Anderson

OWH: CDC 'really missing the mark': Emails show UNMC doc concerned by federal virus response

Weeks before the novel coronavirus hit Nebraska, medical experts from around the nation communicated regularly by email, pondering the severity of the outbreak, sharing frustrations and planning for the worst.
The chain of emails includes several messages from Dr. James Lawler, a director in the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Global Center for Health Security, who worked with Gov. Pete Ricketts to develop Nebraska's pandemic plan.
The group of experts nicknamed the email chain "Red Dawn," a nod to the 1984 film starring Patrick Swayze and Charlie Sheen about an invasion of the United States. The emails were obtained by the New York Times.
Lawler came to UNMC in 2018 after a Navy career that included White House assignments dealing with biodefense, pandemic response and health preparedness.
Though he never refers to Nebraska specifically, Lawler seemed to predict early on that the coronavirus would become a major global public health threat.
In a Jan. 28 email, Lawler wrote:
"Great Understatements in History:
Napoleon's retreat from Moscow — 'just a little stroll gone bad'
Pompeii — 'a bit of a dust storm'
Hiroshima — 'summer heat wave'
AND
Wuhan — 'just a bad flu season' "
That email was in response to Dr. Carter Mecher, a senior medical adviser at the Veterans Affairs Department. Mecher wrote that "the chatter on the blogs is that the (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) is behind the curve. … Anyway you cut it, this is going to be bad. You guys made fun of me screaming to close the schools. Now I'm screaming, close the colleges and universities."
In a statement provided to The World-Herald on Sunday, Lawler said:
"The emails obtained by the New York Times were part of an ongoing correspondence with a group of individuals with long experience in pandemic and public heath preparedness. My statements were

strictly my personal opinions."
Many in the chain mention "NPIs," or nonpharmaceutical interventions, which are actions that people and communities can take to help slow the spread of illnesses. Those often include closing schools and businesses.
In a Feb. 9 email, Lawler stressed the importance of such interventions:
"I think we also mostly agree that without dramatic NPI we can expect 30-40% infection rate by the end of community epidemic — and even with dramatic NPI, that total may only be slightly reduced."
It's a point reiterated in a March 13 email in which Lawler and others criticize the CDC for questioning the value of closing schools.
"CDC is really missing the mark here," Lawler wrote. "By the time you have substantial community transmission it is too late. It's like ignoring the smoke detector and waiting until your entire house is on fire to call the fire dept. Plus, how are you supposed to know when you have community transmission when they haven't been able to provide a diagnostic assay that can be used widely and at high volume?"
Around the time Lawler sent that email, the CDC had quietly updated its guidance on school closings, advising educators that closing for at least eight weeks might be the most effective way to contain the coronavirus, according to the Times. But many schools across the country were ahead of that advice.
Major school districts in the metro area, including the Omaha Public Schools and the Millard, Papillion-La Vista and Bellevue school districts, announced indefinite closures on March 16.
By March 23, all 244 Nebraska districts had announced that they were closing to students.
After its first confirmed case on March 6, Nebraska for most of two weeks had more coronavirus cases per capita than the neighboring states of Iowa, Kansas, South Dakota and Missouri, a World-Herald analysis found.
Nebraska's first case of community spread was March 15.
On March 16, Nebraska limited gatherings to 10 people — the same day it was recommended by the CDC. The move had the effect of shutting the doors to most bars and restaurants. Ricketts had three days earlier been among the nation's first governors to set any kind of gathering limit, having declared a 250-person limit March 13.
Ricketts and Lawler said last week that it's possible that Nebraska's early actions helped flatten the state's coronavirus curve.
On April 3, Lawler said publicly that he didn't think Nebraska needed a stay-at-home or shelter-in-place order.
"What I think we should really focus on is improving compliance and adherence," he said. "This depends on people taking this seriously and doing the right thing."
By Jessica Wade and Reece Ristau

OWH: State corrections chief says prisons doing exceptional job preventing coronavirus outbreak

LINCOLN — Nebraska is facing another legal challenge to its overcrowded prison system, while the head of that system labeled the agency's response to the coronavirus pandemic as "exceptional" on Friday.
The ACLU of Nebraska, which is already suing the state for alleged inadequate health care for inmates, filed an emergency motion in U.S. District Court on Friday, questioning whether the state

was taking adequate steps to protect prison inmates from the virus.
“COVID-19 presents a grave threat to people in Nebraska’s prisons, where extreme overcrowding and chronic understaffing had already put the health and safety of everyone in these facilities at risk,” said David Fathi, director of the ACLU’s National Prison Project and the lead attorney in the ACLU’s pending federal lawsuit.
The motion Friday sought the release of the state’s coronavirus prevention plans, saying that it appeared the plans didn’t “meet the urgency” of the health emergency.
But later, both Gov. Pete Ricketts and State Corrections Director Scott Frakes defended the steps taken in state prisons, saying they appear to be working in preventing the spread of COVID-19 in Nebraska’s 10 state prisons.
New precautions were revealed Friday — prison-made cloth masks are now being issued to all inmates, all staff entering the prison are now being tested for fevers and newly arrived inmates must be isolated for 14 days to ensure they’re not bringing the virus into prisons.
“We have done an exceptional job of keeping COVID-19 out of our prisons,” Frakes said. No Nebraska prison inmates, as of Friday afternoon, had tested positive for the virus.
While Frakes admitted that dealing with the coronavirus would be easier if his system weren’t overcrowded, he said the health care provided in prison is equal to or better than what many people on the outside are getting.
“Yes, (social distancing) can be a challenge in a prison setting, especially in dorms,” he said. “But there are ways to ensure that people maintain distance whenever possible.”
Frakes said rehabilitation programs and recreation periods have been limited to no more than 10 inmates, some club activities have been suspended and prisoners are given multiple reminders to stay separate. Inmates also have been issued extra, free bars of soap and a bleach solution to clean cells.
Some family members of inmates, as well as the ACLU, have expressed concerns about the adequacy of safety measures taken in Nebraska’s prisons, which hold about 2,000 more inmates than their design capacity.
Some have questioned why several prisons and jails — including neighboring Iowa and the Douglas County Jail — have released several prisoners while Nebraska has not, even though it has 1,676 inmates over age 50 deemed as high risk. The ACLU motion said the state’s prisons are dangerous places for COVID-19 because many inmates have underlying health conditions, and because of overcrowding and exposure to an ever-shifting group of corrections officers.
The union that represents corrections officers and security staff at the state’s Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers has also expressed concerns, though union leaders said Friday that they opposed the release of inmates. Six treatment center staffers in Kearney have tested positive, as well as one staffer at the State Penitentiary in Lincoln.
Ricketts said Nebraskans do not support releasing inmates, and that includes the roughly 2,000 inmates who are behind bars for nonviolent crimes. Many of those inmates have been convicted of multiple crimes in the past or have been sent back to prison after violating conditions of release on parole, he said.
Releasing inmates hastily, without finishing their rehabilitation programs or setting up places for them to work and live, also risks repeat crimes, Ricketts said.
Frakes said Iowa’s prison system is different, so it could release inmates who had been granted parole but were still sleeping overnight behind bars.
He said emergency pandemic plans, and the location of isolation cells, won’t be made public for

security and safety reasons. On Wednesday, 200 inmates rioted at a Washington state prison after inmates were ordered to vacate their cells to make room for infected prisoners, Frakes said.
While all staffers and teens at the Kearney Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center were tested after an outbreak there, no additional testing was deemed necessary of staff at the State Penitentiary. Frakes said that was because the staffer who tested positive for the coronavirus had been isolating at home for 15 days, and no other staff or inmates had exhibited symptoms.
The ACLU filed a federal lawsuit in 2017, claiming that the state provides inadequate medical and mental health care that violates the constitutional rights of inmates. Friday's emergency motion is among a string of lawsuits filed nationally by the ACLU to protect prisoners from the coronavirus outbreak.
In related virus news:

- As of Friday afternoon, 648 Nebraskans had tested positive for the coronavirus and 17 had died. The total included 116 cases in Hall County, where a virus hot spot has emerged in Grand Island. The county has half as many cases as Douglas County.
- Ricketts said the state has spent $1.2 million on personal protection equipment from the $83.6 million in emergency funds approved by the State Legislature to combat the pandemic. The purchases include 1.9 million gloves and 300,000 N95 masks for local public health districts and first responders.
- The latest voluntary polls taken by users of Google showed that 40% of respondents were spending less time retail shopping and recreating, which the governor said shows "progress" in heeding his advice to "stay home."
- When asked if it was OK for churches to hold Easter services with 10 or fewer people, or whether pickup basketball games were appropriate, Ricketts responded that while that would meet the "social distancing" suggestions to avoid large groups, he would suggest that people stay home.
- Ricketts repeated that the May 12 election primary will not be moved, saying it would "disenfranchise" voters. He urged Nebraskans to request a mail-in ballot and vote that way.

By Martha Stoddard and Paul Hammel

LJS: Director details what Nebraska prisons are doing to avoid COVID-19 spread

Nebraska prisons director Scott Frakes said the Department of Correctional Services has had a pandemic plan for years.
It had been using it recently, during the influenza season, and so it was an easy shift when coronavirus came along, he said Friday during Gov. Pete Ricketts' daily news briefing. In December, food inventories and paper supplies (plenty of toilet paper) were increased.
No coronavirus cases have been confirmed among inmates, he said, and none are symptomatic. One staff member that had a positive test result has been at home 15 days.
The medical plan includes areas for quarantine, isolation and responding to people who are symptomatic or confirmed. That information, however, is confidential to a small number of people, Frakes said. Incidents have happened around the country in the past week, one driven by inmates upset they had to move from their housing so others could be quarantined there.
The department began releasing information on the virus to staff on Feb. 25 and by March 16 had opened an emergency operations center and stopped visits. By the end of March the prisons were conducting enhanced staff screenings.
Frakes provided this information:
* The prisons do not have a hospital setting and no ventilators, but rather skilled nursing areas. They have more than 200 health care staff and 130 mental health staff, as well as contracted services.

* Coronavirus testing will be done as medically indicated, and the department has testing resources and more on order, and good community provider support. There's no plan to test all staff members as was done at the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in Kearney, which has a much smaller staff.
* The department recently established a quarantine plan for offenders coming into intake centers, with medical screening upon arrival and checks twice a day for 14 days. It has also separated vulnerable inmates, including older offenders, and mothers, children and pregnant women at the women's prison in York.

On Friday, the ACLU of Nebraska and others filed an emergency motion in their federal lawsuit Sabata v. Frakes, requesting the court require the department to provide its plan for prevention, management and treatment of COVID-19.

That would include its pandemic plan and facility-specific quarantine plans, the motion says.

“COVID-19 presents a grave threat to people in Nebraska’s prisons, where extreme overcrowding and chronic understaffing had already put the health and safety of everyone in these facilities at risk,” said David Fathi, lead counsel on the case and director of the ACLU National Prison Project.

The lawsuit claims the system already has deficiencies in medical care — life-threatening delays in the receipt of emergency medical care, obstacles in requesting urgent and non-urgent care, and excessive delays to receiving in-person medical visits — that have long plagued the state's prisons.

Frakes would not comment on the motion. But he continued to detail what the prisons are doing to protect inmates and staff.

Inmates have been directed to wear masks anytime they are not sitting on or in their beds. Employees also wear masks.

The department has increased sanitation, including a bleach solution to wipe flat surfaces, door knobs and rails. Vehicles are also sanitized.

Social distancing is used, but can be challenging in a prison, Frakes said, especially in units with dormitories, such as units 6, 7 and 8 at the Nebraska State Penitentiary, which has about 100 beds per dorm. Still, there are ways to ensure people maintain as safe a distance as possible, he said.

Some activities have been reduced or stopped if physical distancing is a problem, he said.

He said communication is ongoing to staff and inmates, although he understands there are staff who would like to know more.

"Sometimes there's a want to know and a need to know," he said. "And it's really important in our business that we identify who it is that needs to know, what it is they need to know, and we get that information in their hands.

"I do videos, I do memos ... We do a daily phone call with all of the wardens as part of our emergency operations center."

Social media is used to communicate to family members, he said.

The department has expanded access to phones for inmates and doubled the time they can be on their tablet phones. The phone provider gives inmates free phone time. A videogram system is tied to the JPay communication system.

The prisons, however, are not set up well for video visits because of bandwidth issues, Frakes said.

"At some point, I know that that would be a really valuable addition," he said.

And the prisons try to provide out-of-cell time as much and as often as possible.

"These are incredibly challenging times," Frakes said, thanking his staff for its work. "We've done an exceptional job of keeping COVID-19 out of our prisons. And we're not going to let up on our efforts."

Ricketts said a "small minority" of people want the state to release prisoners early to avoid coronavirus spread. The "vast majority" of Nebraskans do not want that, he said.
"When you think about that concept," he said, "it's really kind of irresponsible."
If those inmates haven't gone through programming to make them less likely to reoffend, they'll just come back, Ricketts said. And if they don't have the proper supports in the community, they are more likely to get infected with the virus. They won't have health care in the community like they would inside the prison system, he said.
The prisons have about 3,500 violent offenders and about 2,000 considered nonviolent, but with serious offenses. The average number of convictions for drug offenders is 19, he said.
About 900 inmates are eligible for parole within a year, and more than one-third of them have been paroled in the past, violated that parole and are now back in the system.
By JoAnne Young

AP: Nebraska prisons head says 1 worker, no inmates infected

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska's corrections department has taken aggressive, early steps to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus inside the state's prisons, and so far the efforts appear to be working, the state corrections director said Friday amid growing safety concerns raised by prisoner advocates.
Director Scott Frakes said his agency has done an "exceptional job" of keeping inmates and staff members healthy.
He said one staff member had tested positive for the coronavirus as of Friday afternoon, and no other cases have shown up among the department's 2,100 employees and 5,500 inmates. The staff member who tested positive has stayed isolated at home for 15 days, he said.
"We have done an exceptional job of keeping COVID-19 out of our prisons," Frakes said at Gov. Pete Ricketts' daily coronavirus news conference.
His comments came as a coalition of prisoner advocacy groups filed an emergency motion in a pending lawsuit to force the agency to release its pandemic prevention plan. The lawsuit, filed in 2017, argues that Nebraska's prison overcrowding and staffing shortages are effectively depriving inmates of critical medical care.
Nebraska's prisons have faced years of scrutiny from lawmakers, and the department has struggled to recruit and retain employees.
"COVID-19 presents a grave threat to people in Nebraska's prisons, where extreme overcrowding and chronic under-staffing had already put the health and safety of everyone in these facilities at risk," said David Fathi, a leader attorney on the case and director of the ACLU National Prison Project.
ACLU of Nebraska Legal Director Adam Sipple said the department's refusal to provide its pandemic plan raises concerns about what exactly prison officials are doing.
"The Department of Correctional Services needs to demonstrate they are following the advice of public health officials," Sipple said.
Nebraska had 635 confirmed cases and 15 deaths as of Friday afternoon, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services. More than 8,700 people have tested negative.
The state reported 57 new cases on Friday, up from 53 on Thursday and 48 on Wednesday.
At the news conference, Frakes said he doesn't plan to release the department's pandemic plan because doing so could anger inmates and reveal security information that would threaten safety in

the prisons.
Frakes said the prisons suspended in-person visits to inmates and imposed tough new safety restrictions on all workers while taking steps to keep inmates separated when possible. He acknowledged that it's difficult in some barracks-style areas for low-risk inmates, but said each inmate has been a mask to wear when they're not lying or sitting on their beds.
He said prison officials began planning for the pandemic in early March and quickly restricted visitors' access to the facilities.
He acknowledged that prison officials are only testing inmates who show symptoms of the virus, and employees who think they may have it are told to consult their own doctors.
The department has also changed the way it trains new hires to minimize physical contact among them, Frakes said. He said the department has seen an uptick in job applications, largely due to a surge in layoffs from private businesses that cut back because of the outbreak.
Meanwhile, state officials said the latest coronavirus death on Thursday was an Omaha-area woman in her 60s with underlying health conditions.
The Department of Health and Human Services also reported that Burt County in northeastern Nebraska and Polk County in east-central Nebraska both reported their first cases of the virus on Thursday.
For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough 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, including pneumonia, and death.
By Grant Schulte and Margery A. Beck

OWH: Coronavirus forces change in Medicaid expansion plans; Oct. 1 still target launch date

LINCOLN — Nebraska officials announced plans Friday to drop the top tier of benefits from the state's Medicaid expansion plan, at least to start.
But they still expect to launch coverage for some 90,000 low-income, working-age adults on Oct. 1, with enrollment starting Aug. 1.
"Expansion will happen on time," according to a statement from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
Gov. Pete Ricketts said changes to the Medicaid expansion plan were forced by the coronavirus, which has occupied the attention of federal officials, and by federal officials' refusal to consider part of the plan.
Nebraska Medicaid officials had sought federal approval to provide a two-tier system, with different benefits and more stringent requirements, including work requirements, than traditional Medicaid. They also asked to end retroactive coverage for most Medicaid patients, including existing patients.
The state had expected approval for both pieces this month. But state officials were told it would be about six months before the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services would review the two-tier proposal.
Ricketts said the state also was told that federal officials "weren't going to honor" the state's bid to eliminate retroactive coverage, so the state is dropping that idea.
That means Nebraska Medicaid will continue to pay for health care services provided three months before the month a person applies for coverage. The provision helps people avoid going into debt for health care costs incurred before they get on Medicaid. It also helps health care providers.

As proposed, the two-tier system would have provided most newly eligible Medicaid patients with dental, vision and over-the-counter medication benefits if they complied with eight requirements, including wellness, personal responsibility and “community engagement.”
The change announced Friday means newly eligible patients, with some exceptions, cannot get those “prime” benefits, which are part of the traditional Medicaid program.
However, they will be able to have so-called basic benefits, which include physical and mental health services and prescription drugs. The higher tier of benefits will be available once federal officials can review and approve the state’s proposal.
The exceptions are people who are considered medically frail, pregnant women and young adults ages 19 and 20. Those groups will get all of the traditional Medicaid benefits.
State Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha questioned whether the law passed by voters in 2018 allows the newly eligible adults to have less coverage than traditional Medicaid patients. But she welcomed the decision to continue retroactive coverage.
“I’ll take the win that we got,” she said.
Molly McCleery, with Nebraska Appleseed, said Friday’s announcement means that Nebraska does not need additional federal approval to launch Medicaid expansion. She called for the state to move up the launch date in light of the coronavirus outbreak.
Nebraska’s two-tier plan, called Heritage Health Adult, was the administration’s answer to the 2018 ballot measure requiring the state to expand Medicaid to more low-income adults as allowed under the federal Affordable Care Act.
Those newly eligible are working-age adults without disabilities or minor children whose incomes fall below 138% of the federal poverty level — $17,236 for a single person or $35,535 for a family of four.
Currently, single adults and couples without minor children cannot qualify for Medicaid, no matter their income level. Also barred are parents and disabled people with incomes higher than the current Medicaid cutoff. Noncitizens are not eligible now and would remain ineligible under expansion.
By Martha Stoddard

LJS: Medicaid expansion encounters another obstacle in Nebraska

Nebraska's Medicaid expansion plan will not be fully implemented when it becomes effective on Oct. 1.
The 90,000 low-income Nebraskans in the workforce who will be newly eligible for coverage will have access to basic Medicaid benefits, but most will not have access to coverage for dental and vision services or over-the-counter medication because of the newest delay mandated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
The Ricketts administration has proposed that those specific benefits in Nebraska must be earned by participation in wellness, personal responsibility and community engagement activities.
"Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, CMS (the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services) has focused considerable time and attention toward addressing this unprecedented public health emergency," the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services announced Friday.
"As a result, CMS has notified DHHS that approval of Nebraska's expansion demonstration waiver will not be finished in time for Nebraska's planned expansion."
The Ricketts administration unveiled its plan one year ago.

The scheduled Oct. 1 implementation date will come almost two years after Nebraska voters approved Medicaid expansion in November 2018 and the new federal decision will push full implementation back another six months.
Benefits are targeted at a new category of recipients composed largely of Nebraskans whose income is at or below 138% of the poverty level, or approximately $16,000 a year.
Typical recipients would include food service employees and retail clerks.
Applications for coverage will begin to be accepted on Aug. 1, state officials said.
By Don Walton

AP: Virus forces changes to Nebraska's Medicaid expansion plan

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska is changing its plans to expand Medicaid in a way that will force more recipients to start out with a "basic" plan that doesn't include coverage for dental and vision services or over-the-counter medications, state officials announced Friday.
The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services said the tweaks were necessary because the federal government is occupied right now with its response to the coronavirus pandemic and doesn't have time to approve the state's Medicaid expansion proposal.
Prime coverage that includes all services won't be available until the federal government approves Nebraska's proposed waiver for the program, and that decision will likely get pushed off for another six months.
However, department officials said they still plan to start accepting applications on Aug. 1, as scheduled. Coverage will begin as scheduled on Oct. 1.
"We are going to be going forward with Medicaid expansion ... but it will only be the basic package and not the prime package," Gov. Pete Ricketts said during his daily coronavirus news conference.
Nebraska voters approved a Medicaid expansion measure in 2018 after years of failed attempts to do so through the Republican-dominated state Legislature. The state's Republican governors have remained adamantly opposed to expansion, although Ricketts promised to respect the will of voters after they passed it.
Critics have accused the governor's administration of slow-walking the expansion and imposing burdensome requirements on recipients, a charge his administration denies. Shortly after it was approved, state officials announced a two-tier system of coverage, with a "basic" plan for all newly qualified recipients and a "premium" plan for people who are working, in school, volunteering or caring for a relative.
"Our approach better achieves the purpose of the Medicaid program by incentivizing positive activities that will improve health outcomes and encourage life successes for participants," the department said in a news release.
The basic plan includes coverage for hospitalizations, emergency care, prescription drugs, lab tests, maternity care and other services. The premium plan offers those benefits as well but adds coverage for dental and vision services, and over-the-counter drugs.
To qualify for prime coverage in the first year, recipients would have needed to participate in care and case management, select a primary care provider and have an annual checkup.
But because the federal government has delayed its approval of Nebraska's plan, prime coverage will only be offered to eligible people who are 19 or 20 years old, pregnant or medically frail, the department said.
A leading advocate for expanding Medicaid said the state should simply offer prime coverage to all

recipients and stop tinkering with different levels of coverage.
"While we appreciate that coverage will not be further delayed beyond Oct. 1, 2020 ... we maintain they can and should start coverage now," said Molly McCleery of Nebraska Appleseed, an advocacy group for low-income people.
An estimated 90,000 Nebraska residents will qualify for coverage once Medicaid is expanded, and McCleery said doing so now would help contain the spread of the coronavirus.
For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough 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, including pneumonia.
By Grant Schulte

OWH: Nebraska not budging from 23-month timeline for launching Medicaid expansion

LINCOLN — Ashley Anderson had been six years without health coverage when she told her story as part of the campaign for a Medicaid expansion ballot measure in Nebraska.
The Omaha woman talked of not being able to see a neurologist or get her anti-seizure medications checked. Of uncontrolled seizures that kept her from working full-time or earning enough to pay for health insurance.
Of side effects she might escape with a different medication. Of unpaid ambulance and emergency room bills.
But Medicaid expansion has yet to begin, nearly 1½ years after voters approved it, and Anderson is still struggling.
"We've been doing all we can to keep her medication filled," said her mother, Shannon Casey. "Not much has changed."
Official plans still call for launching the expansion on Oct. 1. That would be 23 months after the November 2018 vote requiring Medicaid to cover some 94,000 low-income adults in Nebraska.
No other state has taken more than 14 months from approval to launch. That includes Utah and Idaho, whose voters approved ballot measures at the same time as Nebraska voters. It also includes at least 10 states that sought federal approval to waive traditional Medicaid rules, as Nebraska has requested.
Advocates blame Gov. Pete Ricketts, an ardent foe of expansion, for the pace of progress.
"It's inexplicable to me other than ideological," said State Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha. "It is purposefully slow-walking the will of the voters of the state of Nebraska."
Ricketts bristled at the suggestion that Nebraska could move faster to implement expansion.
"Not one person has seriously approached us to say I've looked at your project plan, here's where you can tighten this timeline," he said. "Not one person."
Ricketts also rejected advocates' calls to speed up the launch in light of the coronavirus epidemic. State Medicaid officials are on track to meet the current start date, he said, but they do not have the ability to start sooner.
Among other tasks, he said, they still have to build up their network of doctors and other providers, finish developing and testing enrollment software, get contracts signed with the private companies that manage Medicaid and rewrite state regulations. HHS officials said the state's methodical approach will pay off in less confusion and stress for providers.
"If we were to change that now it would push it back to at least December," Ricketts said, "so that's not a feasible option."

But Molly McCleery of Nebraska Appleseed argued that speeding up Medicaid expansion would help Nebraska weather the coronavirus epidemic and the economic havoc it has caused.
"Coronavirus changes things in that it shines a light on the fact that we need as many people covered as possible," she said. "We want to make sure we're using every tool we have to fight coronavirus."
People without the means to pay for health care are less likely to go to the doctor if they have symptoms of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, and less likely to be tested. They also are more likely to have untreated medical conditions that make them more vulnerable, Cavanaugh said.
Under federal coronavirus legislation, states can use their Medicaid programs to pay for coronavirus testing of uninsured people. Nebraska has not sought approval for that option so far. The federal legislation does not cover treatment of the disease.
Jessica Schubel, a senior policy analyst with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C., said soaring unemployment because of coronavirus also increases the need for Medicaid expansion, because it means more people losing employer-provided health insurance.
"Medicaid serves as a lifeline for low-income Americans at times such as this," she said.
Nebraska has seen more than 66,000 workers file first-time jobless claims over the last three weeks. Each week has set a new record as businesses struggle with restrictions aimed at slowing the spread of the virus.
Medicaid expansion would provide coverage for working-age adults without disabilities or minor children whose incomes fall below 138% of the federal poverty level — $17,236 for a single person or $35,535 for a family of four.
Currently, single adults and couples without minor children cannot qualify for Medicaid, no matter their income level. Also barred are parents and disabled people with incomes higher than the current Medicaid cutoff. Noncitizens are not eligible now and would remain ineligible under expansion.
The coronavirus already has forced some changes in Nebraska's Medicaid expansion plans.
HHS officials announced Friday that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has been too occupied dealing with the virus to review and approve the state's plan for a two-tier system of expansion benefits. Approval had been expected this month but now will be at least six months away.
As proposed, the system would have provided most newly eligible Medicaid patients with dental, vision and over-the-counter medication benefits if they complied with eight requirements, including wellness, personal responsibility and "community engagement."
The change announced Friday means newly eligible patients, with some exceptions, cannot get those "prime" benefits, which are part of the traditional Medicaid program.
However, they will get so-called basic benefits, which include physical and mental health services and prescription drugs. Nebraska officials said the higher tier of benefits will be available once federal officials can review and approve the state's proposal.
The exceptions are people considered medically frail, pregnant women and young adults ages 19 and 20. Those groups will get all of the traditional Medicaid benefits.
Ricketts and state Medicaid officials said the expansion remains on track for an Oct. 1 launch date, with applications starting Aug. 1.
One key expansion advocate said she supports the state's launch timeline, given the coronavirus pandemic.

Sen. Sara Howard of Omaha, the Health and Human Services Committee chairwoman, said she worries that HHS workers could not cope with the stress of speeding up the expansion.
Although the state has filled the new positions planned for the expansion, she said the coronavirus has taken its toll on employees, many of whom have been required to continue working from their offices.
"I don't want to put any more strain on their system," Howard said. "I think that's the most pragmatic and practical approach."
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Hammel: Nebraska State Capitol is still open for tours, but there aren't many takers

LINCOLN — Kirk Woita is a lot like a Maytag repairman these days.
Woita, a tour guide at the Nebraska State Capitol, is still on duty, willing to lead anyone on an educational trek through the unique and historic building. But he's had no takers for at least the last week and only a few before that.
The U.S. Capitol quit public tours a month ago because of the coronavirus. And the Iowa State Capitol, like many state capitols, is closed, so no tours.
So what's the matter with Nebraska? Why are public tours still being offered here?
As long as the Nebraska State Capitol remains open, tours will at least be offered, said Bob Ripley, the State Capitol administrator.
"The governor has wanted to keep state government open to the public and have services available to the public," Ripley said. "Although our numbers are way down, as you might expect, and as you would hope, our tour staff have remained at their post, as have other state workers."
So Woita waits, like the Maytag repairman who, the commercials touted, had nothing to do because Maytags didn't need repairs.
April is usually the height of visitation at the State Capitol, with 400 to 500 fourth graders a day pouring into the building to get a tour and watch the State Legislature in action.
But the Capitol now is a virtual ghost town. While state legislators' offices are officially "open," almost all staffers are working from home. The Capitol's gift shop, which is run by the state historical society, is closed, as is the cafeteria.
Other offices are operating with skeletal staffs. The Governor's Office might be an exception — Gov. Pete Ricketts is holding briefings Monday-Friday on the coronavirus outbreak, though with proper social distancing of reporters and speakers.
As for tourists, only a few have wandered into the Capitol in the last couple of weeks, and even fewer have taken tours, which are available on the hour.
"I bet you could count them on one hand and a thumb," Ripley said.
The tour office has a sign reminding people to follow social distancing — keep at least 6 feet apart. And tours do not include stops inside enclosed spaces, like the Supreme Court chambers. Hand sanitizer stations have been set up in the vending areas of the Capitol and at the information desk.
A state law is partly the reason the tours remain available.
Ripley said that when the unique, skyscraper Capitol was completed in 1932, state lawmakers were so impressed that they passed a law requiring free public tours of the building.
* * *
Former Nebraska governor and U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson is working on a book that, he promises, will

shed new light on what's wrong in Washington, D.C., as well as on his controversial decision to cast the final vote to pass the health care plan pushed by President Barack Obama. He held out for an amendment to the act, thus the deal became known as the "Cornhusker Kickback."

The book, which doesn't have a title yet, will be about "when things worked in the U.S. Senate and how they worked, and why they need to change," Nelson said recently.

"There's a lot of talk about bipartisanship in Washington, but it's a rare commodity these days," he said.

Nelson, who served 12 years in the Senate and eight years as governor, is working on the book with Jake Thompson, a former World-Herald reporter who later worked as a press aide to Nelson.

The release date? Undetermined, the senator said.

The book won't be a dirge about the death of the two-party system, he said, but will offer suggestions on how to repair things.

Nelson had called to remind this writer that he was the governor who took a gamble and appointed a Native American to the State Historical Society Board of Trustees back in 1991.

It was risky, because at the time, the society was embroiled in a fight with the state's native tribes. The society held skeletal remains of many Native Americans — some hundreds of years old — and the tribes wanted them back.

Tapping Chuck Trimble, an Oglala Sioux journalist and businessman, to join the board was controversial.

But Trimble, who died on March 2, proved to be a peacemaker and resolved the conflict.

Nelson said it just showed "what a good person like him can do in a quiet and effective way."

* * *

The new state travel guide has taken some geographical liberties with nearly a dozen Nebraska towns.

Rather than being listed among its brethren burgs in eastern Nebraska, Decatur, Hubbard and Lyons were magically transformed into Sand Hills communities in the guide, which was released earlier this year.

Same for Sprague, Shickley, Tobias, Milligan, Bradshaw, Blue Springs and Alexandria, which are listed among Sand Hills towns when — unless the earth beneath us moved during the coronavirus crisis — they are located south of the Platte River in southeast Nebraska.

The guide is produced by a Florida company, Miles Partnership, which specializes (according to its website) in marketing of tourist destinations. But a spokeswoman for the Nebraska Tourism Commission said that local officials proofread the guide before it goes to press.

The mistakes were human errors, said Erin Lenz of the Tourism Commission.

"It's been noted to fix for the 2021 guide," Lenz said.

* * *

At Charlie's Pub in Milligan, manager Stacy Lineweber said she's been too busy to notice the gaffe.

The pub, which is southwest of Lincoln (and at least 150 miles from the nearest sand hill), has been doing a booming business in takeout orders despite having to lay off 90% of its staff when it closed its dining room a week ago, Lineweber said.

Thursday night, the pub (formerly Evening with Friends) set a new record for chicken wings, selling 1,326 wings. That's a whole lotta barbecue sauce.

By Paul Hammel

LJS: Don Walton: Easter with a dangerous pandemic intruder

An unusual Easter Sunday.
The most meaningful day in the life of Christians, dramatically ushered in by lightning and rain in Lincoln at 4 a.m.
But it did not wash away the pandemic, which over time seems to have become the central and overriding element in how we go about the mechanics of living our daily lives.
Perhaps Willie Nelson says it best: "You were always on my mind."
All in all, everything considered, it seems to me that Gov. Pete Ricketts has earned high marks for his handling of this challenge.
From the beginning, he has been fully engaged and committed, turning to the University of Nebraska Medical Center early for expert advice and then working day and night to try to manage the arrival of the coronavirus.
Along the way, he has made decisions to adopt rules and regulations and expectations as the virus began to spread across the state.
And Dr. Anthony Fauci says he is doing just fine.
Lack of sufficient testing is the huge vulnerability in the governor's plan — and in the plan of every state, some more than others. Without adequate testing, we don't know where the virus is as it reaches out to infect more people.
Ricketts and his medical experts know that.
"We need to expand testing," the governor said on his most recent NET town hall telecast.
"I'm on the phone with suppliers," seeking the required reagents for increased testing, he said.
"We're working on it every day."
Lack of sufficient testing "absolutely (is) a concern," UNMC Dr. James Lawler said on that same broadcast. "We'd like to have a significant increase in testing."
That's the missing "temperature gauge," which is key to tracking and managing the outbreak, he said.
And containing it.
It seems clear that there's a huge federal government failure here.
George W. Bush initiated pandemic planning in 2005 and it included a focus on vaccine development and stockpiling of critical supplies.
Barack Obama formed a pandemic response office and a team of his aides briefed members of Donald Trump's incoming administration on what they had learned about preparing to fight a pandemic seven days before he took office.
That pandemic response office was subsequently scrapped and Trump was clearly slow in recognizing or even understanding the scope or danger of the onrushing virus. And that is costing American lives.
Looking ahead now, Lawler says: "We're not going to have life as we knew it until we have a vaccine."
Most estimates suggest that may take a year to a year and a half, although one British scientist says she is "80% confident" that her team at Oxford is developing an effective vaccine that could be ready by September.
Go, Brit!
Dr. Fauci, the guy I would look to, says: "By November, we hope to have it under control."
That's a long ways away.
The worst assessment I heard in watching way too many TV reports Saturday: Major League Baseball

will lose both the 2020 and 2021 seasons and football will not be played this coming season as we await development and successful trials of a vaccine.
Finishing up:
* Nebraska Democrats will conduct their state convention June 14 by telephone.
* There are more coronavirus cases per capita in Sioux Falls than in Chicago or Seattle after an outbreak in a South Dakota meatpacking plant.
* An NBC News report says packing plant workers in Grand Island are "afraid to go to work, but can't afford to stay home."
* Getting the Medicaid expansion that was approved by Nebraska voters in 2018 fully implemented has been — and still is — a long road. Look for language in future initiatives to be more precisely, and defensively, tailored.
* Here's the attitude that Dr. Lawler suggests Nebraskans adopt: "I'm going to wear a mask to protect you."
By Don Walton

OWH: Omaha criminals aren't self-isolating — major offenses holding steady despite coronavirus

Apparently, criminals in Omaha are missing the memo about staying home.
No stark changes have been recorded among the seven main categories of crime in Omaha since restrictions on public gatherings were implemented in mid-March.
“You can’t even say it’s statistically significant,” said Deputy Director David Van Dyke, who oversees the Omaha Police Department’s technical and reporting services. “Across the board, some weeks are quieter, but it’s not outside the normal deviation of things.”
For the crimes that the Police Department reports to the FBI — homicide, sexual assault, robbery, assault, burglary, theft and motor vehicle theft — the numbers don’t show a clear trend during the weeks that followed March 14.
On that day, officials announced the first community spread of COVID-19 in Douglas County, which triggered a shutdown of events with more than 250 people. Four days later, on March 18, Douglas County Health Director Adi Pour prohibited gatherings of more than 10 people, with several exclusions.
Crimes occurring from March 29 to April 4 (the Police Department counts a week from Sunday to Saturday), which is the most recent information that was available, were at similar levels from weeks past, with a couple of exceptions.
Two homicides occurred that week — both on April 4 — which was the first time all year that more than one person was criminally slain in one day or one week.
Also notable is that the number of crimes the department does not have to report to the FBI, which include criminal mischief, theft by deception, trespassing, harassment and others, did not rise above 200 in the week of March 29 to April 4. In the previous eight weeks, the total of those crimes had been at least 10% higher.
However, slight changes were seen among various 911 calls and arrests.
Most concerning, Van Dyke said, is that child abuse calls are down 23% since March 15, a day before the Omaha and Millard Public Schools closed indefinitely. Teachers and school officials are mandatory reporters and make up 20% to 30% of those who file child abuse reports, said Omaha Police Capt. Anna Colon, who leads the child victim sexual assault unit.

“If a child is being abused and you know of it, we ask that you report it to police. No one’s going to look at you as being the nosy neighbor, getting in the family’s business,” Colon said. “It’s very worrisome knowing that those kids are possibly still being abused and we don’t know who they are. As long as COVID-19 has us isolated in the home, then that abuse is going to continue to go on.”
At Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts’ Tuesday press conference, the director of Nebraska’s Child and Family Services Division said the state’s child abuse hotline, 800-652-1999, has seen a 20% decrease in calls in the past month.
Stephanie Beasley said she was concerned that school closures, job losses and social isolation would lead to an uptick in child abuse cases.
“These stressors can create a recipe for child abuse and neglect,” she said at the press conference, asking people to be on the lookout for child abuse.
After that plea to the public, the number of 911 calls that day in the Omaha area about child abuse doubled, Van Dyke said. Calls also spiked last Monday when Ricketts talked about domestic violence. Since mid-March, daily domestic violence calls have been up between 6% and 10%.
A positive effect from people staying home and not hanging out at bars or going to parties is that driving under the influence arrests have dropped in recent weeks. Weekly DUI arrests from Feb. 2 to March 14 ranged from a high of 47 to a low of 36. The week of March 15, 35 DUI arrests were logged in Omaha. For the final full week in March, arrests dropped to 22.
“We’re seeing less traffic on the roads. People don’t go out as much. The bars are closed,” Van Dyke said. He added that collisions and officer-initiated traffic stops have also decreased.
Some of the officers from the traffic unit have been tapped to conduct coronavirus compliance checks, making sure that large groups of people aren’t gathering in public spaces, bars or restaurants. Wednesday, Omaha Police Chief Todd Schmaderer said officers have done more than 500 compliance checks relating to coronavirus health directives, 50 of which have been at the now-closed city parks.
Other notable changes early on in the pandemic, Van Dyke said, are that disturbance calls to 911 are up 10%. Also, calls to the department’s telephone reporting squad, which handles low-priority and nonemergency reports, have doubled, from about 100 per day to 200. Instead of having officers go out to take reports, department officials have asked residents to call the department’s nonemergency number at 402-444-4877. That’s an effort to prevent the potential spread of the virus.
Van Dyke, his crime analysis unit and command staff are constantly looking at the crime data to see where they need to allocate officers based on the threats posed to the public.
Right now, that includes COVID-19.
“One of the biggest threats to our community right now is community spread” of the virus, Van Dyke said. “So that’s why we’re allocating our resources to try to prevent that.”
By Alia Conley

Casper Star Tribune: Rural state governors’ COVID-19 responses draw national attention

Late last month, MSNBC television host Rachel Maddow drew her 10 million Twitter followers’ attention to Wyoming Gov. Mark Gordon’s resistance to limiting the spread of COVID-19 with a shelter-in-place order.
Friday, Dr. Anthony Fauci — one of the most prominent faces in the federal government’s response to the coronavirus — complimented Gordon at the White House’s daily coronavirus briefing, saying

that he was doing an "extraordinary job," according to Gordon.
Wyoming's governor is not alone in the increased attention, joining a number of other Republican governors who have come under increasing scrutiny as more than 40 states have now implemented stay-at-home orders. Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts — another leader reluctant to issue such an order — has faced criticism from the medical community in his state, while South Dakota's Kristi Noem has faced similar critiques from the national press.
Gordon has also faced criticism in his own state. Last week, the Wyoming Medical Society sent a letter to the governor urging him to issue a shelter-in-place order "before it was too late."
As the federal government has largely left the direction of each state's COVID-19 response to its governor, positions like Gordon's have been defended by others as an acknowledgement that many areas of the country — while not immune to the virus — are simply different than those with tightly populated municipal centers.
But with criticism and praise raining from both sides, rural governors are left to contemplate one question: Do they need the New York City treatment to slow the spread of the virus?
Shelter in place: What does it mean?
The definition of a stay-at-home or shelter-in-place order varies from state to state. From the strictest orders — like those seen in New York with its PAUSE Act — to those that are less restrictive, most states have at least stressed the importance of staying home, to varying success. The key difference, however, is each state's willingness to enforce it.
The diversity of responses seen across the country is by constitutional design, said William Galston of the Brookings Institution, mapped out to encompass the unique needs of a state or region to avoid one-size-fits-all directives from Washington that don't apply to places that may be geographically or politically different.
As long as the governors of a state are adequately protecting public health, he said, the federal government would have no prerogative to intervene. Otherwise, state leaders have broad latitude to apply their policies and response in whatever way they see fit.
"The governor of Wyoming, like every other governor, has to decide how to coordinate expert opinion, economic considerations and the public when making his decisions," said Galston, an expert in governance studies specializing in U.S. public philosophy and political institutions.
So far, what Gordon has actually said and directed mirror the goals and intents of other, more aggressive states, only without the hard-line provisions that require individuals to stay home and shut down a wider category of businesses.
While states like Colorado have only allowed businesses to stay open if they're deem essential — gas stations, critical manufacturing, and grocery and liquor stores, for example — Gordon has so far limited his activity to closing specific public gathering places like bars, restaurants and fitness centers, as well as personal care businesses like spas and salons, while prohibiting gatherings of 10 or more people.
The governor also recently took the step of signing an order requiring some visitors to Wyoming to quarantine themselves for 14 days upon entering the state, advising hotels, Airbnbs and other establishments to inform visitors of the restrictions upon their entrance.
While local law enforcement has statutory authority to issue citations for violating those orders, the onus is essentially on the agencies to determine whether someone is breaking the law.
"Our Wyoming values say to talk less and say more," Gordon said April 3. "Our orders talk less and say more."
In that sense, Gordon's orders are rhetorically the same as any other state's. But his mandates have

one key difference: They largely restrict the free rein of businesses, not people.
From the governor's position, however, those positions seem to have delivered: In a press conference on Wednesday, Gordon touted the success of those policies by pointing to Google analytics showing community travel down nearly 40 percent in some jurisdictions — seemingly an improvement over the "F" grade for social distancing the state received from the tech company Unacast in late March.
Even with an increase in compliance, can Wyoming truly expect to be successful without a shelter-in-place order? According to Allan Louden, an expert in political communication at Wake Forest University who spent six years as an educator in Wyoming, success without hard-line enforcement comes down to consistent messaging — particularly messaging that outlines the severity of the crisis.
"I am struck with the calm tone, but more so of how he weaves who is the responsible actor with who must act," Louden said after reviewing video of Gordon's statements in press conferences. "That is, individualsing compliance a little more bluntly.
"You tend to think of the West as the land of the rugged individualist, that tends to be skeptical of authority," he said. "But not this time."
Identity under crisis
That's not to say the public and social considerations of addressing the crisis in Wyoming have been uncomplicated: On the governor's social media pages, members of the public have been regularly calling on him to implement more aggressive containment measures as often as they've advised him to stay the course.
In a comment on a recent Facebook post, a woman who identified herself as an intensive care unit nurse in Cheyenne said she was "begging" him to shut down the state, writing "I am the one that will take care of these people that do not adhere to social distancing."
Others have supported his handling of the crisis, with one commenter urging Wyomingites to quit challenging him to make an order and listen to what he says: simply, stay at home unless you have to leave.
Two separate public opinion polls released last week — one by Microsoft, one by the University of Wyoming — show public approval of Gordon's response at around 80 percent: a double-digit increase of his nation-leading approval rating by the Morning Consult.
However, the dichotomy in public opinion — whether Gordon has done too much or too little — has begun to come into focus. Lawmakers like Rep. Scott Clem, R-Gillette, and Thermopolis Republican John Winter have written letters urging the governor to "reopen the economy" amid the crisis, while a number of communities around the state have weighed implementing ordinances of their own that go beyond the actions taken by the governor.
This divide came into focus this week with two protests of very different types taking place in different parts of the state: a conservative-led demonstration in Casper urging the reopening of the economy, and a petition drive in Jackson urging Gordon to allow the town to proceed with the strict shelter-in-place order he previously rejected.
That deal was later renegotiated and approved, after the order was rewritten to allow more businesses to stay open. However, some residents — noting the area's high volumes of tourist traffic, tight population density and large population of commuters from other states and counties — argue that they need more leeway.
"If we come out of this and everyone wonders if we overreacted, then we did the right thing," Teton County Commissioner Mark Newcomb wrote in an email. "The flip side is simply unfathomable in

this community. It's too small, too tight-knit, too everyone-knows-someone. We would have been devastated. And we still have to see how we finally come out. So far it's not great, but we're doing OK."

"There has been some local pushback," Teton County Board of Commissioners chairwoman Natalia Macker said. "But we've just been trying to educate as much as possible about why this is a necessary step, what the benefits could be and what our goal is for doing it."

Questions of legality, enforcement

While aggressive responses to control the virus have been boosted as the most effective means of slowing the spread in a number of jurisdictions, a spokesperson for Gordon said there are plenty of reasons to stop short of harder guidelines to shelter in place.

The legal framework for implementing stay-at-home orders across the country is also something of a patchwork, with statutes outlining the governor's legal authority differing from state to state. According to the Wyoming Attorney General's Office, the current statutory scheme in Wyoming says that the state's authority to implement public health orders extends to the county level, though municipalities would be covered by any county public health order or statewide public health order. Even then, Gordon has already stated a willingness to proceed with guidelines counties feel are "appropriate to enact" and only to the extent that the state health officer agrees they "are necessary to protect public health."

At this point, Gordon said he would only issue that ultimate action in the form of a shutdown of all businesses — most states to implement business shutdowns have done so only for businesses deemed non-essential — and an aggressive stay-at-home order that will restrict all people in their homes. The governor underscored this point in a news conference last week by pointing out the long list of business exemptions in places like Colorado.

"The Governor believes shelter-in-place orders may have value," Gordon's spokesman, Michael Pearlman, wrote in an email. "But different parts of the country have different characteristics, and the effectiveness of any stay-at-home order boils down to both how it is written and whether it's effective at changing behavior, something he has been continually emphasizing."

Still, communities seem to be preparing for whether actual enforcement of the governor's orders will eventually be necessary.

Natrona County law enforcement has already been informed it has the statutory authority to punish apparent violations of statewide orders. Cheyenne's public services committee discussed Tuesday the logistics of local enforcement, contemplating a potential emergency ordinance to give their local police direction in issuing citations for individuals deemed to be in violation; the committee also debated how to comply with future restrictions that could lead to some businesses needing to seek out exemptions.

"We support the governor's recommendations, and we're going to enforce them," said Cheyenne Mayor Marian Orr, who has expressed her desire for a statewide shelter-in-place order.

According to some experts, the challenges of enforcing a top-down directive — and its reliance on law enforcement — can be a limitation for state governments to slow the spread and could potentially pale in comparison to clear communication about the risk of ignoring social distancing guidelines.

"As far as enforcement, some governors and mayors have chosen to use local police to enforce these orders, especially in egregious violations, but it's impractical to rely on enforcement to make the difference," said Bill Kramer, the vice president of policy at Multistate Associates, a public affairs consulting firm based in Virginia. "Clearly communicating the seriousness of the pandemic and the

best precautions residents can take will be the most effective way for state and local leaders to stop the spread of COVID-19 in their states."

Ultimately, a governor's ability to fight the spread of COVID-19 comes from public trust and the governor's own understanding of the nuance necessary to balance public health and public opinion. But the amount of leeway afforded to governors can also offer something different: a deeper understanding of the role of culture in how states respond to national crises.

"The term we use in political science is that states are 'laboratories of government,'" said Florida Atlantic University professor Kevin Wagner, who studies political behavior in state legislatures around the country. "So, if there's a problem, and a bunch of different states treat it differently, we can eventually discover the best way to deal with a problem — by seeing which states succeed and which fail.

"The problem in this particular kind of case is that when you have an inconsistency of approaches to a pandemic, it doesn't just affect one state — it affects surrounding states and maybe the entire country," he added. "So, maybe our laboratories of democracy are great for this particular kind of problem."

By Nick Reynolds

GII: Getting back to normal not possible

Thankfully, the Easter Bunny came through this morning to give us a sense of normalcy along with plenty of candy to satisfy our sweet teeth.

With animals also contracting COVID-19, it's a good thing that we don't have an Easter tiger, cat or dog.

We should also appreciate that the Easter Bunny is considered an essential worker in the majority of the United States that are under shelter-in-place orders.

And if snowy, miserable weather had to hit Central Nebraska on an Easter, this is as good as any. It's not like any sunrise services were disrupted by a late blast of winter.

This weather should encourage us Nebraskans to follow our state's really strong shelter-in-place recommendation.

Many are encouraging Gov. Pete Ricketts to change that recommendation to an order. He seems to want to be the parent who won't set a curfew for the teenagers because he wants to trust them to do the right thing on their own.

But (formerly acting) members of the government shouldn't believe that only Navy aircraft carrier captains are "too stupid or too naive" when it comes to dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. All it takes are a few bad choices by a few individuals to potentially put dozens of lives at risk.

I'm sure that there aren't too many people out there who are fully enjoying this whole shelter-in-place thing, whether it is ordered or just recommended.

You miss family gatherings. There isn't time to catch up with friends in person. No attending church services.

It's difficult not personally interacting with (at least some) co-workers.

We all can't wait until things get back to "normal."

But will things ever exactly return to the way they were just one month ago?

A lot of jobs were lost. Businesses shut their doors. Some of those businesses aren't coming back. Neither are some of those jobs.

And the work environments of those businesses that emerge intact could permanently change.

While working from home isn't for everyone, there are plenty of benefits. Some may want to continue to take advantage of those when workplaces reopen, at least a few days a week.
It is nice setting your alarm for five minutes before you have to start work, throwing on one of your 35 Pearl Jam T-shirts, grabbing some leftovers out of the fridge and making that 15-second commute to your office.
Don't judge me if that is my routine, even though my job usually starts at 3 p.m.
If this working-from-home thing is necessary for another month or two, it'll be even tougher to readjust back to an office environment.
Those first few days we might have to print off checklists to remind ourselves to once again start using deodorant, hair products and pants.
It'll be time to find those razors and shaving cream containers again (you ladies, too — this is a sexist free writing zone).
The opportunity to take mid-shift naps that we now have will likely be frowned upon once we return to our usual places of employment.
I may need to look at YouTube videos to remember how to put gas into my car.
That's something I used to do about once a week in the old days due to traveling around the area covering sports.
I haven't fueled up in almost a month. I'm tempted to go out and drive around the block 100 times so I need gas and can take advantage of these super cheap prices.
Hiding half of my face under a mask while in public is something I could be happy to see extend past the COVID-19 threat.
And if we could extend our personal space to 6 feet permanently and maintain one-way aisles in grocery stores, I wouldn't object.
I just hope that we get the opportunity to find out exactly what the new normal is sooner rather than later.
By Dale Miller

OWH: Nebraska's coronavirus cases jump to 814; deaths remain at 17

Nebraska reported 814 cases of the novel coronavirus on Sunday, up from 704 cases Saturday. Among the new cases were the first to be reported in Dakota County. Both involved women in their 30s and 40s.
The state's death total remained at 17. The two latest deaths, reported Friday afternoon, were a man and a woman, both in their 70s, who were residents of a long-term-care facility. Both died at a Hall County hospital in the Grand Island area.
More than 10,991 people had been tested in the state as of Sunday evening, and 10,158 of those tests were negative.
Douglas County continued to lead Nebraska with 242 total COVID-19 cases, an increase of seven from Saturday.
Hall County was second-highest with 161, up from 131 on Saturday. Some of those cases have come from an outbreak at a meatpacking plant.
Officials in Lincoln announced two new coronavirus cases on Sunday, bringing Lancaster County's total to 54. Lancaster County has reported one death.
In Iowa, health officials Sunday reported 77 new coronavirus cases, bringing the state's total to 1,587. Seven new deaths brought the state's total to 41.

Beginning Monday, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services will begin updating its coronavirus dashboard once daily at 6 p.m. It had been providing updates twice a day. "This change aims to ensure clarity and consistency in the reporting of case numbers throughout Nebraska," health officials said.
By Reece Ristau

OWH: Nebraska reports 704 COVID-19 cases; Iowa reports 3 more disease-related deaths

The number of COVID-19 cases in Nebraska has hit 704, state officials said at midday Saturday.
The number is up 56 from the 648 reported Friday evening.
The number of deaths in the state remained at 17, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
COVID-19 has now been reported in 43 of the state's 93 counties, including Kimball County, which has reported nine cases.
Douglas County, which has the most COVID-19 cases of any county in the state, had 235 cases as of Saturday, the Douglas County Health Department said. Officials announced 13 new cases Saturday, involving six men and seven women between ages 18 and 76.
Two cases were community-acquired, with eight of the people having contact with a known case and three of the others still under investigation, county health officials said. None of them are hospitalized.
Hall County, which has seen a recent surge in numbers, is second-highest with 131.
Lancaster County has 50. Sarpy County has 41.
The department reported that 10,197 people have been tested.
Iowa officials on Saturday were reporting 1,510 positive COVID-19 cases, up from 1,388 on Friday.
According to the Iowa Department of Health, three additional deaths have been reported in the state: a person between 61 and 80 years old in Crawford County, a person between 61 and 80 in Madison County and a person 81 or older in Johnson County.
The majority of new Iowa cases were reported in Washington, Tama, Scott, Polk, Muscatine, Marshall, Louisa, Linn, Johnson, Clinton and Blackhawk Counties.
By Joe Dejka

OWH: 2 more Nebraskans have died from COVID-19, raising state's total to 17, officials say

Two more Nebraskans have died from the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, bringing the state's total to 17, officials said Friday afternoon.
The Central District Health Department, which serves Hall, Hamilton and Merrick Counties, reported the deaths — a man and a woman, both of whom were in their 70s and who were residents of a long-term care facility. They both died at a Hall County hospital, officials said.
A total of 140 lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported in that area, which includes Grand Island. That's up 35 from Thursday.
On Friday evening, Nebraska reported 648 cases of COVID-19, up from 586 Thursday night.
Douglas County on Friday reported 24 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the county's total to 222.
The cases involve 12 men and 12 women between ages 23 and 104, officials said. Eleven of the

people had contact with a known case, five people were new cases of community spread and details weren't immediately available on eight of the cases. One of the newly identified people with COVID-19 is known to be hospitalized.

The Douglas County Health Department has received 3,189 test results since testing began in March, officials said. As of Friday afternoon, the positive rate for the past week was 7.9%, compared with 7% last week and 5.7% two weeks ago. Six Douglas County residents are known to have died from COVID-19.

Earlier, Lincoln officials confirmed four new cases of COVID-19 in that city, bringing the city's total to 49 confirmed cases.

The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department is investigating the new cases, which include three people in their 30s and one in his or her 60s.

The health department is monitoring 101 people. Lancaster County has reported one death from COVID-19, 1,400 negative tests, the 49 positives and 12 tests that are pending at the Nebraska Public Health Lab.

Sarpy County has the fourth-most cases, with 39. Adams County, home of Hastings, is next with 38.

Iowa said Friday that it has 118 more cases for a total of 1,388. Two more deaths from COVID-19 also have been reported, the Iowa Department of Public Health said. The two people who died were residents of Linn County. One was between ages 61 and 80 and the other was 81 or older.

Iowa has had an additional 862 negative tests for a total of 14,565 to date.

By Bob Glissmann

OWH: 9 coronavirus cases reported at Callaway assisted living facility in central Nebraska

An outbreak of the novel coronavirus has struck a central Nebraska assisted living facility, health officials said over the weekend.

Nine cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, were reported at the Callaway Good Life Center in Callaway, which is in Custer County.

The cases are all related and involve one staff member and eight residents, according to the Loup Basin Public Health Department, which serves Blaine, Custer, Garfield, Greeley, Howard, Loup, Sherman, Valley and Wheeler Counties.

Residents who tested positive or were symptomatic were moved out of the facility, the Health Department said in a press release. Rooms were being deep-cleaned. Those who remain at the center are being monitored for symptoms.

Staff members are using "proper infection control procedures" to care for those who remain, health officials said.

The center had taken early precautions to prevent the spread of the virus, the Health Department said. Visits by family members, volunteers and other nonessential visitors were halted as of March 10, and staff members have been monitored for symptoms upon arrival for each shift.

The Callaway cases are being considered community spread because those who tested positive did not have a known history of travel. Officials are tracing contacts and reaching out to everyone who may have been exposed.

Custer County had reported 13 cases as of Sunday afternoon, nine of which were tied to the center.

Several nursing homes in Nebraska have experienced outbreaks of COVID-19. At least two of them — the Douglas County Health Center and a nursing home in Adams County — have recorded deaths. More than 3,600 deaths nationwide have been linked to coronavirus outbreaks in nursing homes

and long-term-care facilities, according to the latest count by the Associated Press.
The Callaway Good Life Center is a 35-bed skilled nursing facility that provides 24-hour care for residents, according to its website. It also provides therapy and rehabilitation services.
By Reece Ristau

NP Telegraph: Great Plains Health housing nine COVID-19 patients from Loup Basin Public Health Department territory

Great Plains Health CEO Mel McNea confirmed Saturday that the hospital is housing nine COVID-19 patients from the Loup Basin Public Health Department, which covers Custer County.
"Those that have arrived so far are being cared for by our highly trained staff," McNea said in a statement. "We are taking every precaution and have isolated the patients in our COVID-19 unit, which is separate from our other patients. Our staff is following all (Centers for Disease and Prevention) guidelines to minimize exposure and stay safe."
LBPHD said in a press release Saturday that it had confirmed nine additional cases in Custer County, all stemming from Callaway Good Life Center in Callaway. According to the LBPHD website and the Department of Health and Human Services there are 13 confirmed cases in Custer County.
The nine cases LBPHD identified Saturday are a staff member and eight residents at the Callaway Good Life Center, it said in its press release.
"Callaway Good Life Center is working in conjunction with Callaway District Hospital, Nebraska Infection Control Assessment and Promotion Program, Department of Health and Human Services, Great Plains Health and Loup Basin Public Health Department," the release said. "This team is working together to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all staff and residents involved. Through the collaboration of these agencies, a decision was made to move those residents who tested positive or are symptomatic out of the facility. A deep clean of the empty rooms is being done so that the residents who tested negative can remain in the facility. They will be closely monitored for a change in health status. Staff is utilizing proper infection control procedures to care for those who remain in Callaway Good Life."
Residents are at a heightened risk of serious complications from the illness, LBPHD said, because of a multitude of threats including age, underlying health conditions and close living conditions. Callaway Good Life Center had taken early precautions and halted visits from families, volunteers, non-essential medical personnel and vendors as of March 10. In addition, staff have also been monitored for symptoms upon arrival for each shift including temperature logs.
The nursing home cases are examples of community transmission of the virus, meaning the patients did not have a known history of travel. LBPHD is doing contact tracing and reaching out to everyone who may have possibly been exposed to any confirmed cases. Health officials say for every person who's tested positive, they've been in contact with an average of 90 people.

OWH: Omaha VA reports 6 COVID-19 cases, 1 death as staff braces for patient surge

Four patients and two staff members of the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System have tested positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, VA officials acknowledged Friday, and one local veteran has died.
The veteran who died from the coronavirus was a man in his 80s who had cancer and was in hospice care at the Douglas County Health Center, near the Omaha VA Medical Center on Woolworth

Avenue. His death was previously reported by The World-Herald on April 4, but not his veteran status.

COVID-19 cases have been diagnosed at Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers in both Omaha and Grand Island, said Kevin Hynes, a VA spokesman.

A resident at the Central Nebraska Veterans' Home in Kearney also tested positive, officials announced Saturday.

Two veterans are being treated as inpatients at the Omaha VA Medical Center, he said. Another has recovered and gone home. Of 67 veterans who have been tested by the VA locally, 63 have tested negative for COVID-19.

Dr. David Williams, the health care system's chief of staff, said Omaha's 5.8% rate of positive tests is far lower than at VA medical centers in New York, where the rate exceeds 30%.

"It's a very vulnerable population, and yet we're seeing a really low rate," he said.

One of the two employees is also under quarantine. The second has recovered, Williams said. Neither was linked to any of the patients who contracted the virus.

The number of cases in Omaha has been unclear because of mistakes by the VA headquarters in Washington on its coronavirus website, publichealth.va.gov/n-coronavirus.

Since late March, the website has been listing positive tests at each VA medical center around the country. Until last week, it was listing as many as 14 cases under "Central Plains HCS (Omaha, Neb.)." However, there is not currently a Central Plains Health Care System within the VA.

On Tuesday, the VA changed the title to "VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System." By Saturday, the number of cases was 15. Nationwide, the VA recorded 3,754 COVID-19 cases and 200 deaths.

Williams said he is certain about the Omaha VA's numbers: 4 positives among 67 tests.

"We track our numbers every day," he said.

He believes the VA is lumping numbers from medical centers in Des Moines and Iowa City in with Omaha's because years ago all three centers operated under the same bureaucratic umbrella.

Williams said the Omaha VA hasn't suffered the shortages of equipment and personnel reported at other VA medical centers around the country and that were forecast in a VA inspector general report issued in late March.

The IG's office sent inspectors unannounced into 58 medical centers and 125 regional clinics between March 19 and 24, and followed up by interviewing senior administrators at 54 of the 58 hospitals, including Omaha.

Among their findings:

- 16 of the 58, including Omaha, needed to improve their process for screening patients. (Omaha unveiled a retooled screening system March 31.)
- 32 of 54 administrators, including Omaha's, expected shortages of supplies in the event of a surge of cases. At Omaha, shortages were expected of gowns, surgical masks, N95 respirators, hand sanitizer and bleach.
- 25 of 54 administrators, including Omaha's, said they expected staffing shortages. At Omaha, the shortfall was expected in the areas of police and environmental management, which includes custodians and housekeepers.

Union officials representing VA workers across the country have complained of shortages of protective equipment at VA facilities across the country, leaving them feeling unprepared and at times frightened to face the coronavirus pandemic.

Irma Westmoreland, a nurse at the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia, told Military Times that the hospital where she works has already run out of paper gowns and is warning staffers to ration their use of linens.

She is president of National Nurses United, which represents 12,000 nurses at 23 VA facilities across the country.
“When we get a surge of cases, where will we be?” Westmoreland told Military Times. “I’m afraid for my co-workers, and I’m afraid for my family.”
Leaders of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 2270, which represents workers at the Omaha VA, did not respond to messages left through its national headquarters.
Williams said the VA has acquired additional supplies — including donated shipments of hand sanitizer from Brickway Brewery in the Old Market and the veteran-owned Soldier Valley Spirits in La Vista — since the inspector general visited last month. Extra equipment has also been donated by Westside Community Schools and the group PPE for Nebraska.
“We’ve been using these donated supplies,” Williams said.
He acknowledged that masks are being rationed in some cases and are handed out by supervisors.
“Every facility had concerns early on about the burn rate,” Williams said. “Right now, we have adequate levels of protective gear.”
He said he believes the state also has enough ICU beds and ventilators to get through a pandemic peak that is expected in late April. They have arrangements in place to help civilian hospitals in an emergency, and vice versa.
“We’re all following the model very carefully,” Williams said. “We want to make sure if the surge comes, we are ready.”
By Steve Liewer

OWH: Nebraska state program to provide hotel rooms to first responders exposed to COVID-19

A program started by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services will provide hotel rooms to first responders exposed to COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.
The goal of the program is to reduce the spread of the virus and prevent workers from bringing it home to loved ones, DHHS said.
Accommodations are for frontline workers who can't quarantine at home or cohabitate with someone who is deemed high-risk.
If a first responder shows signs of COVID-19 they will be able to self-isolate and receive appropriate care as needed, DHHS said.
First responders, including health care workers, EMS, law enforcement and corrections officers, can request a room by calling (833) 220-0018.
Calls can be made from 7 a.m. - 7 p.m. seven days a week. Messages left on the after-hours voicemail will be returned the following day. Turnaround time for a site placement will be within 24 hours.
Lancaster County workers must coordinate directly with their employer.
Upon arrival, individuals checking-in will be asked to present their employee ID to verify their registration.
By Jessica Wade

OWH: Meatpacking workers are considered essential. But what happens when they get COVID-19?

Shoppers are filling their carts and freezers with meat as the coronavirus crisis forces Americans to stay home and cook more meals there.

But what happens when the workers who slice, process and package those chicken breasts, pot roasts and sausage links start to get sick?

As of Thursday, 28 workers at the massive JBS USA beef plant in Grand Island had tested positive for the coronavirus, representing a quarter of the 105 confirmed cases in the Grand Island area. The meatpacking plant is Grand Island's largest employer, with 3,600 workers clocking in for different shifts.

A worker at the McCain Foods frozen french fry plant in Grand Island has tested positive, too. Because testing for the virus has been so limited, it's hard to get a handle on how many may have been exposed.

Social distancing isn't easy at plants where employees often stand nearly shoulder to shoulder on the production line, slaughtering and cutting chickens, pigs or cattle, or handling frozen or packaged foods. And when the virus gets inside a facility, it can spread quickly, threatening workers and food operations.

Many workers are immigrants or refugees, including Latinos, Somalis and Karen from Myanmar. They are typically paid somewhere between $15 and $21 per hour for fast-paced, demanding work in chilly temperatures.

What's on the mind of those workers these days?

"Primarily fear," said Eric Reeder, president of United Food & Commercial Workers Local 293.

The union represents 10,000 food workers at JBS, Cargill, Nestlé, Omaha Steaks, Tyson and Smithfield plants located in both rural and urban areas: Omaha, Crete, Schuyler, Nebraska City, Grand Island and Tecumseh.

"There's two types of workers as far as what they're afraid of," Reeder said. "You have the workers who are afraid of contracting the virus, and then you have the workers who are worried about losing their job or their home" if they have to quarantine or a plant halts production.

Hundreds of worried workers have called out sick from the JBS plant in recent days, he said.

Gleibis Rodriguez, an organizer with Heartland Workers Center, has talked to several workers at McCain Foods and JBS. A few who can afford it are taking two weeks off, unpaid, until the outbreak at the beef plant is contained.

The workers there are not a monolith, she said. Some told her the company should have taken action sooner to protect its employees, while others have praised JBS for the increased cleaning and disinfecting of work areas.

A JBS spokesman confirmed an uptick in absences but said "every day thousands of committed team members show up to the facility to help our nation face this crisis. We salute and thank them."

Meat packing and processing is big business in Nebraska and Iowa. Plants say they are taking every precaution they can to limit the spread of the virus, while still churning out food to feed America and customers abroad. Plant representatives have said their employees are proud to be considered essential workers by the federal government.

"When you heard we were being requested to stay at home, what happened in our stores?" said Al Juhnke, the executive director of the Nebraska Pork Producers Association. "All those shelves were emptied, including the meat case. But magically, if you've been in the store in the last week, all that product is back in place. People need to recognize that as bad as things are with COVID-19, what would make it even worse is a major disruption in our food supply."

At several workplaces, workers' temperatures are being taken at the start of shifts; Plexiglas dividers

are being installed in cafeterias to separate workers; and plants are being carefully cleaned and even fogged with disinfectant. Employees at the JBS plant in Grand Island are wearing their usual gloves, frocks and hard hats, plus safety goggles and balaclavas that cover most of their face.

"We are not asking people to come to work here when they're sick. I want to be very clear about that," said Tim Schellpeper, who runs the JBS Fed Beef division, on a plant tour last week.

Tyson is trying to procure more personal protective equipment — like masks — from federal agencies, spokeswoman Liz Croston wrote in an email, and allowing workers to wear homemade face coverings in the meantime.

Some employers have boosted hourly pay or offered bonuses — sometimes with good attendance strings attached. The JBS plant in Grand Island gave out ribeyes on Friday. (The company's giveaway was met with a mix of "When can I get mine?" enthusiasm and "Steaks, really?" skepticism from Facebook commenters.)

Advocacy groups like Heartland Workers Center, Nebraska Appleseed and the food workers union are pushing employers and state policymakers to implement stronger, more uniform safety measures, like slowing down production lines so people can spread out and giving workers paid sick leave and hazard pay.

The response from plants has been a mixed bag, Reeder said. Nestlé said it will continue to pay workers if a plant shuts down. Others have said overtime pay is enough — no hourly raises.

Across the country, workers have fallen ill at some of the biggest names in food.

A Tyson plant in Columbus Junction, Iowa, halted production. A Smithfield Foods pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, that pumped out 18 million servings of meat per day has closed for three days for cleaning after more than 80 workers tested positive for the coronavirus. A 900-worker Cargill plant in Pennsylvania closed temporarily after dozens of workers tested positive.

Workers at a JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado, have called in sick and complained about the lack of precautions there. A 78-year-old plant worker there died Tuesday from COVID-19 complications, although JBS officials deny he caught the virus at work. Union officials say at least two workers at a Tyson chicken plant in Georgia have died.

Several meat and food production facilities in Nebraska and western Iowa, including Tyson, Cargill, Michael Foods and Smithfield, declined to say whether any workers there have COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, citing medical privacy.

No confirmed cases have been reported at the chicken plant in Fremont run by Lincoln Premium Poultry, spokeswoman Jessica Kolterman said Friday. The plant takes in and carves up more than 1 million chickens a week for wholesaler Costco.

"We've been very fortunate we have not had any cases at this point, but we also recognize we have 1,100 people involved in our operation at some level," Kolterman said. Coronavirus cases among a workforce that large is a very real possibility.

Food producers are trying to ease consumers' fears about the safety of the food they're plucking off shelves. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says there is currently no evidence of the coronavirus being transmitted by food or food packaging.

But if workers contract the contagious coronavirus, the effects can ripple outward.

There is the personal: the impact on the workers who fall ill, their families who must quarantine and the community where they live, where the virus could spread.

The Hall County area, home to Grand Island, roughly 61,000 residents and several large manufacturers, has more confirmed coronavirus cases on a per capita basis than the much more populous Douglas County, where Omaha is located. Four people there have died.

“Grand Island stands on the front line in the fight against COVID-19 because we have many people employed in necessary jobs — manufacturing, food processing, agricultural equipment,” Mayor Roger Steele said last week at a press conference. “While other cities can ask office workers to work from home, that is not an option for our workers.”

Cases aren’t emerging at just the JBS plant — health care workers at area clinics and nursing facilities have tested positive, too.

“Once it gets into the community, then it’s hard to say, is it in the plant or is it that the people in the community are then going to work at the plant?” said Central District Health Department Director Teresa Anderson, who oversees Hall, Merrick and Hamilton Counties. “At this point, it’s impossible to know where it started.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture gives health directors like Anderson the power to shut down facilities overseen by the federal Food Safety and Inspection Service, but Anderson said any stricter measures would have to be approved by the governor or Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Then there is the business side. While one pork plant in South Dakota shutting down for a few days shouldn’t lead to shortages at the grocery store, multiple closures could sideline workers, slow production and cause backups for the farmers and ranchers who raise animals.

While plants with outbreaks should consider ceasing production temporarily, “you cannot close all of the food industry,” said Sergio Sosa, the executive director of the Heartland Workers Center. “We need food and workers need to get paid.”

Many farmers and ranchers were already struggling to recover from historic flooding last year and a fire at a Tyson processing plant in Kansas that disrupted beef markets.

“The idea that we’re buying more stuff at the grocery store, well that’s good, but that doesn’t matriculate back into greater incomes for agriculture,” said Brad Lubben, an extension agriculture economist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

While it’s true that demand is up at the grocery store, producers and processors are doing less business with restaurants, many of which have temporarily closed or scaled back to takeout-only.

It’s not as simple as shifting the bacon typically sold to eateries to grocery store coolers, said Lubben and Jennifer Ryan, a professor of supply chain management and analytics at UNL. Those supply chains are separate and distinct, often involving different cuts of meat and packaging, similar to the differences between commercial and home toilet paper.

“For a processed meat product like chicken tenders, you’ll see product sold to both restaurants and grocery stores,” Ryan said. “But the package sizes and labeling will be different.”

Ground beef may be a hot item for home cooks, but there’s a glut of the higher-end cuts typically served at restaurants, like ribeyes, filets and prime rib.

There’s not a shortage of product, supply chain experts said, so there’s no need to panic-buy meat.

“We have enough resiliency built into the system that we can continue to operate, unless we have multiple plants in a geographic area go down,” Juhnke said. “As long as you’re not hoarding.”

By Erin Duffy

OWH: How will Nebraska schools spend $128 million aid package? College students to get help

Nebraska K-12 school districts, colleges and universities will split a $128 million federal care package to deal with the impacts of the coronavirus outbreak, with a good chunk of the money aimed at

helping college students.
How the money for students will be allocated is uncertain.
The law gives local and state education leaders latitude on allocating and spending the aid.
One Nebraska state official has cautioned school district leaders against using the extra money for pay raises during the crisis.
The federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act will provide $60.8 million to Nebraska school districts to cover expenses related to the pandemic.
The Omaha Public Schools will get almost $24.1 million. It appears the money could be used for anything from meal planning to computers for distance learning to training for the eventual reopening of schools. OPS receives the largest share among Nebraska's districts. The amount of money districts are getting is tied to the amount of federal Title I money they normally receive.
The Lincoln Public Schools is slated to get $7.5 million.
The Millard Public Schools will receive $1.8 million.
The act also provides more than $67.2 million for 38 Nebraska colleges and universities. At least half of that money must be used for emergency financial aid grants to students whose education was disrupted.
The University of Nebraska system will receive about $31.6 million for its four campuses: Lincoln, Omaha, Kearney and the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. Half of the money must go to students.
Nebraska's state colleges — Chadron, Peru and Wayne — will receive a total of about $4.4 million.
Community colleges — Central, Metropolitan, Mid-Plains, Southeast and Western Nebraska — are slated to receive about $15.3 million.
Creighton University will receive nearly $3.2 million.
"It's pretty clear we need to get those funds into students' hands as quickly as we can," said Chris Kabourek, vice president and chief financial officer of the University of Nebraska.
Just how that will happen, and which students will get the money, is not clear.
U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, in a letter Thursday to college and university presidents, said the money should aid college students whose lives were disrupted and are facing financial challenges and struggling to make ends meet.
She wrote that the act gives universities and colleges significant discretion on how to award the money to students.
The money can be awarded to all students, or to only those with significant need, she wrote.
The only statutory restriction, she wrote, is that the money cover costs from the disruption.
DeVos said that could include food, housing, course materials, technology, health care and child care.
She encouraged colleges to allocate aid to students with the greatest need and suggested the awards be capped at $6,195, which is the federal Pell Grant threshold.
Local K-12 officials appear to have significant leeway on how to spend the money.
For K-12 schools, it could mean purchasing computers and online materials for distance learning while schools are closed, but spokespersons for the Millard and Omaha districts said it's too early to say how their districts would spend it.
State Sen. Mike Groene, the Education Committee chair of the Nebraska Legislature, cautioned school officials about taking advantage of the aid during a crisis.
"This is not the time for local elected boards to be passing out pay raises, benefit increases or adding programs," he said.

He said the money should be used for property tax relief.
With school buildings and buses idle, activities and travel canceled and teachers working from home, districts should be spending less money now, he said. That savings, he said, could help offset next year's budget.
A spokesman for the Nebraska Department of Education said officials expect to receive guidance from the U.S. Department of Education on what the K-12 money can be spent on.
U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., in a statement, said Friday that the law was structured to give spending flexibility to local school leaders.
"We want these resources to meet local needs and, for a lot of students, that's going to mean software and technology," Sasse said.
Jenni Benson, president of the Nebraska State Education Association, said President Donald Trump and the U.S. Congress have given locally elected school boards needed latitude to decide how to use the funds.
"The funds are to be used to support and ensure the safety and education of children — and there is a list of permissible uses to which our local school boards must adhere," Benson said.
According to Benson, the money can cover a variety of costs, including the planning for school closures, cleaning and sanitizing facilities and training staff on how to ensure buildings are safe for the return of students. It can be used for purchasing educational technology, planning for online learning and how to support and serve special needs students, she said.
The distribution of aid for other metro Omaha school districts is as follows: Elkhorn, $127,000; Douglas County West, $98,400; Ralston, $523,000; Bennington, $75,600; Westside, $491,500; Bellevue, $774,000; Papillion La Vista, $386,400; Gretna, $123,200; Springfield Platteview, $53,500.
By Joe Dejka

OWH: Why Food Bank of the Heartland faces a 'perfect storm' amid pandemic

The challenge facing the Food Bank for the Heartland from this year's coronavirus outbreak far exceeds the difficulties posed by last year's historic flooding.
Thousands of Nebraskans and Iowans have lost their jobs, making it tough for them to afford food. The food supply chain is bottlenecked. People and retail stores are donating less food.
"It is absolutely a perfect storm, what we are facing," said Brian Barks, president and CEO of Food Bank for the Heartland.
The Food Bank's need has doubled while purchasing costs have risen almost tenfold as grocery stores donate half the food they normally do.
Usually, the Food Bank spends $73,000 per month to buy food. In March, the nonprofit spent $675,000.
Barks said April's food and operational costs could top $1 million.
"While we can buy food, it takes longer for us to get it," he said. "There's a lot of competition out there for that food."
The situation is similarly dire across the country. As public school systems shuttered, students who rely on receiving meals there were in many cases left in the lurch. Many churches, schools and community organizations that had once distributed food were forced to close. All of that has led to greater demand at food banks and pantries.
Even as donations of money have increased across the nation, many orders placed by food banks were canceled as suppliers struggled to keep up with panic-buying.

The Food Bank for the Heartland distributes food to 600 pantries, shelters and partners across Nebraska and western Iowa. It receives food from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and buys it through Feeding America, which works with 200 food banks across the country.
Wednesday, Feeding America notified its food bank partners that half of the usual 50 vendors removed themselves from the donation program, Barks said. Normally, food banks can choose from among 1,000 food items, but the list is down to 600, including duplicate or undesirable foods, Barks said.
The Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church food pantry is one of the hundreds of smaller pantries that buys food from the Food Bank for the Heartland. While the pantry used to be "guest choice," meaning attendees could shop and pick out their food, organizers now put various items in bags and distribute them to people.
The pantry is professionally sanitized twice a week, and volunteers wear homemade masks sewn by a church member, said Susann Henry, the director of the pantry.
So far, the pantry hasn't seen a huge change in demand. It usually assists about 400 people, and it has been fortunate because donations from the congregation and food sources have been plentiful enough that it hasn't had to turn anyone away.
"If (congregants) had to get the food out of their refrigerators, they wouldn't be turned away," Henry said.
The pantry usually is open Mondays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., but in light of the pandemic, organizers have added a Friday evening pickup time. Because the pantry isn't open the day after Easter, Good Friday visitors received extra food to last the week.
The Food Bank's 25 to 30 mobile pantry events are now drive-up, where volunteers give 28-pound packs of nonperishable food items, plus additional produce or bakery goods. They also provide grab-and-go breakfast and lunch for children at several schools across the metro area.
While Food Bank leaders appreciate volunteer help and food donations, Barks said, the organization can better stretch a dollar than a regular consumer can. One dollar can provide three individual meals, and the need is greater than ever, he said.
"Yes, we are grateful for food that comes to us by the grocery sack, but what we need right now is food by the semi," he said. "This is statewide. Every county in Nebraska and every county in Iowa is experiencing the exact same thing. It doesn't matter if you're in the metro area or a rural community, we are giving the same message: We need more."
To donate to the Food Bank for the Heartland, go to foodbankheartland.org.
By Alia Conley

10/11: COVID-19: Per capita data shows different story of virus in Nebraska

LINCOLN, Neb. -- A quick glance at our county-by-county map, and it's clear to see why many view Nebraska's biggest population centers - Omaha and Lincoln - as coronavirus hot zones. As we dug into the numbers, however, it became clear that's not quite the case.
As of 8:00 p.m. on April 10, our combined data from the Department of Health and Human Services and local health departments shows 668 COVID-19 cases in Nebraska. Nearly 33-percent of those cases are in Douglas County, a county with a population of 571,327 (according to July 1, 2019 U.S. Census data).
To get the per capita rate, we calculated how many residents per 100,000 people are positive. For Douglas County, the number is about 37.

It's quite the contrast to Kimball County, which is in the southwest corner of Nebraska's panhandle. There are ten lab-confirmed cases, which is only about 1.4 percent of the State's total. However, when accounting for Kimball County's population, 3,632, the per capita rate for 100,000 residents is a whopping 275. That's seven-times the rate of Douglas County.

The second highest per capita rate in Nebraska belongs to Hall County, or the Grand Island area. At a population of 61,353, the per capita rate (for 100,000 residents) is about 210. With 129 cases, it's also the second highest county total in the state.

The Central District Health Department has seen rampant community spread throughout the area, and between Hall, Hamilton, and Merrick counties, has seen 140 COVID-19 cases.

Top Ten COVID-19 Rates by County in Nebraska

Per 100,000 residents

Kimball: 275

Hall: 210

Adams: 124

Gage: 116

Hamilton: 96

Washington: 96

Franklin: 67

Buffalo: 62

Gosper: 50

Lincoln: 49

Douglas County is 12th highest when accounting for per capita COVID-19 cases.

Lancaster County, which at 49 cases has the third highest countywide total, actually ranks 34th in Nebraska in COVID-19 cases per capita. With a population of 319,090, Lancaster County's rate per 100,000 people is about 15.

As a whole state, with a population of 1.93 million people, Nebraska's rate per 100,000 people is about 34.

To put some of the numbers in greater context, here's a list of per capita data in some of the hardest hit and/or largest populated areas of the United States:

Nassau County, New York

Population: 1.4 million

Per 100,000: 1,585

Cook County, Illinois

Population: 5.1 million

Per 100,000: 242

Suffolk County, Massachusetts

Population: 803,000

Per 100,000: 564

Los Angeles County, California

Population: 10 million

Per 100,000: 84

King County, Washington

Population: 2.2 million

Per 100,000: 183

Orleans Parish, Louisiana

Population: 390,000
Per 100,000: 1,388
Miami-Dade County, Florida
Population: 2.7 million
Per 100,000: 225
By Bill Schammert

KNEB: Federal stimulus payments intended for basic needs may disappear for thousands of low-income Nebraskans unless action is taken

Federal CARES Act stimulus payments will soon be arriving in low-income Nebraskans' bank accounts, many of whom have already lost their jobs and steady income due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But this stimulus payment, intended to help pay for food, rent, utilities, and other basic necessities, is at risk for thousands of low-income families. Bank garnishments are likely to begin for past debts and judgments, taking away the stimulus payments and freezing up accounts at the worst possible time, with low-income Nebraskans expecting the stimulus payment to help them afford vital necessities such as food and rent during this crisis.

Starting this next week, it is expected that CARES Act stimulus payments of up to $1,200 per individual and $500 per child will be deposited into bank accounts. In most instances, payments will be automatically deposited into the bank account connected with the taxpayer's 2018 or 2019 income tax return.

Although Congress protected the stimulus payments from debts owed to the federal government (excluding child support), Congress did not protect these payments from other creditors. This leaves many low-income Nebraskans fully exposed to the risk of having their stimulus payments taken to pay old debts rather than being used to meet current basic needs.

Although under Nebraska law these payments are probably ultimately exempt for most low-income families (after a complex legal process, including a court hearing), creditors can still take these stimulus payments by moving ahead and garnishing bank accounts. And this happens quickly, often without a family noticing until they go to the grocery store and their money is gone or they are frozen out of their bank acount.

Contact Legal Aid of Nebraska immediately if bank account funds are frozen or garnished.

Legal Aid is raising this concern because of present law and the lowered ability of the courts to respond during this crisis- raising great fear that these stimulus payments, intended to keep families afloat, will instead be used largely to pay old debts.

Individuals who have their bank accounts garnished need to act fast.

Bank account funds are frozen until there is a hearing, meaning the account cannot be accessed to pay for rent, food or other necessities. The presumption will be the stimulus payment funds are not exempt, unless the debtor requests a hearing, files an inventory, and attends a court hearing. When a bank account is garnished, there are only three days to request a hearing. After three days, if no hearing is requested, creditors can request that the bank turn the funds over to the creditor.

Almost all low-income debtors (98%) have no legal representation in these exemption claims. Self-represented debtors are at a serious disadvantage when trying to protect their limited funds and claim their stimulus payment is exempt. Debtors representing themselves are unlikely to know how to do this. Plus, they are not able to file anything electronically, and must go down to the courthouse to file their paperwork during this public health emergency.

Further, Nebraska County Courts (who hear these claims of exemptions) have responded to the COVID-19 threat differently all across the state. There is no one way being used by every court to handle civil cases, including exemption hearings, during this public health emergency. Although the courts remain "open," in some counties the doors to the court house may literally be locked, making it difficult for self-represented debtors to even file the necessary court paperwork.

Additionally, the debtor herself may be under quarantine, sick, or caring for small children or a sick family member, and unable to attend a hearing in person. Even if she knew enough to request a hearing and fill out an inventory, this will cause her claim of exemption to be denied.

Individuals who are experiencing or at risk of bank garnishment should do the following.

• Monitor bank account activity to determine whether funds have been deposited or garnished.

• Consider withdrawing the cash or using a pre-paid debit card to store the stimulus payments.

• Contact Legal Aid of Nebraska immediately if bank account funds are garnished. Legal Aid makes protection from bank garnishment a priority and will provide qualifying individuals with an attorney who can electronically file the necessary claim of exemption and appear at a hearing telephonically so that no one needs to risk exposure to the COVID virus.

• Please call Legal Aid's COVID-19 Disaster Relief Hotline: 1-844-268-5627

What needs to happen to further protect these stimulus payments.

Without an automatic exemption for the stimulus payment, Legal Aid fears those who it was meant to help will lose the ability to pay for necessities in this very tough time.

If the stimulus payments were automatically exempt, low-income Nebraskans could access these necessary funds immediately without risk of losing them to creditors. This could occur through an Executive Order of the Governor per the present state of emergency, or other change in Nebraska law.

Furthermore, if automatic exemptions not possible, hearings on garnishments should only be telephonic hearings at this time. Most debtors representing themselves, though, do not know how to request a telephonic hearing. County Courts should immediately require all garnishment hearings to be telephonic.

About Legal Aid of Nebraska

Legal Aid of Nebraska was established in 1963 and is the only statewide non-profit civil legal aid provider in Nebraska, providing free, high quality services to low-income Nebraskans in all 93 counties. Legal Aid's mission is "to promote justice, dignity, hope and self-sufficiency through quality civil legal aid for those who have nowhere else to turn." Legal Aid's administrative offices are in Omaha, Nebraska.

By Legal Aid of Nebraska

NCN: Nebraska child care's excruciating COVID-19 decision: can I afford to close? Can I afford not to?

Last week, two children at Erika Felt's in-home child care sweetly hugged one another. It was the sort of hug that normally makes Felt, a longtime Omaha child care provider, smile with satisfaction. Last week it made her want to cry.

"The children want to stay close together," Felt says. "They are scared. We all are.

"But I had to tell them last week, 'You can love them, but you can't hug them.' It's something that in my wildest dreams I never thought I would say to a 5-year-old."

Felt and nearly every child care provider in Nebraska currently find themselves stuck in an impossible

situation, making decisions they couldn't have fathomed making even a month ago.
Many of the state's child care providers are terrified for their health, their employees' health, and the health of the children in their care during the coronavirus crisis, according to a new statewide survey by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute. (Learn more and read the survey highlights at buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/resources/covid-19.)
Providers know that children don't do social distancing. They know that children, who are often less affected by the virus, could easily pass it to one another, and then to their parents, their grandparents, and the wider community. And many providers, while diligently sanitizing, report that it's both hard to get ample cleaning supplies and hard to clean every toy every time a child touches it.
"The bar is closed. The nail salon is closed. Banks are closing their lobbies. Banks! The school is closed," says Stephanie Briggs, owner of the Kinder Academy in Bruning, who shuttered her child care last week. "You tell me: Is K-12 more important than birth to 5? Is everyone else's safety more important than ours?"
But many providers are also terrified about what will happen if they do shut their doors. Many have already lost a giant chunk of their income as parents keep their children at home, either because they have decided it's safer or because someone in the family has been laid off. Many providers have already furloughed employees and are wading through oft-confusing government aid, including expanded unemployment and small business loans.
And many are worried that, if they lock their doors, they will never reopen them.
Fewer than 25 percent of Nebraska child care providers say they can survive closing for two or three weeks, according to the Buffett Institute survey results.
And hardly any Nebraska child care provider believes she can survive closing for more than a month.
Despite this, some 400 child care providers have already closed, at least temporarily, according to Nebraska's Department of Health and Human Services.
"I pay rent. This morning, when I get off the phone, I will be paying my rent with my credit card," says Felt, who has lost three of her six regular children at her northwest Omaha in-home child care. A fourth child was kept at home for the first time Wednesday, though that child's parents are continuing to pay.
"If I lose all my kids the reality is pretty simple," Felt says. "I'm going to be homeless."
The people who care for and educate Nebraska's young children are now asking themselves hard-to-answer questions: Do I stay open or do I close? Can I afford to close? Can I afford not to?
Experts say that the excruciating decisions that Nebraska child care providers currently face highlight two truths about our state's early care and education system.
One: Early childhood care and education is crucial to the state, its economy, and its future.
If that wasn't obvious before, it's blindingly so now.
"If we're going to talk about essential personnel…if you work in a hospital or at a grocery store, and can't watch your child for a period of time, then the next question is: 'Who is going to watch my child?' So yes, child care providers are essential," says Betty Medinger, senior vice president at the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.
Two: Despite early childhood care and education's obvious importance, the Nebraska system is built upon a wildly shaky economic foundation.
In January, the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission highlighted that the median annual pay for an early childhood center teacher is a paltry $18,706. Low pay forces many early childhood caregivers and teachers to leave the profession in pursuit of economic stability—rampant turnover

that hurts families and kids. The commission, composed of state leaders in government, business, community development, and education, has recommended that $911 million in federal, state, and private money is needed annually to fully fund the state's early care and education system by 2030. Currently, the system operates on $459 million each year, roughly half of what is needed.

Nebraska's child care system has trouble withstanding even the slightest setback. The system, and most providers, are completely unprepared for the four-alarm health-and-financial disaster of a global pandemic.

"This really is a building on fire," says Cathy Lang, director of the Nebraska Business Development Center at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and a member of the workforce commission. "And now we really have to put it out."

The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF) is spearheading the effort to help Nebraska child care providers. The organization has built a resource list for providers to link them to badly needed resources and help answer questions. To learn more visit www.nebraskachildren.org.

NCFF is also leading a group effort to build a website that will link health care providers, emergency responders, and other essential personnel with licensed Nebraska child care providers who are still open.

The Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, in conjunction with NCFF, is offering $1,000 emergency relief funds. All licensed child care providers in the state who are currently open and serving families are eligible to apply. Funds are limited. Fill out an application here: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Relief-Fund-NCFF-NECC

Lang also advises that child care owners and providers in need of help should call their local banker for financial advice, including on how to apply for the new small business loan and loan forgiveness programs. The Nebraska Business Development Center is offering free statewide consulting, she says. The Center for Rural Affairs' Rural Enterprise Assistance Project may be able to provide assistance to providers in rural Nebraska, Lang says. Providers should also join local coalitions or contact community leaders to learn more about what's happening to combat the COVID-19 crisis in their towns, Medinger says.

As Nebraska's early childhood organizations band together to try to help the state's early childhood providers, the providers themselves continue to make a previously unfathomable decision:

Do I stay open to help essential workers and prevent the collapse of my business? Or do I close because I think it's the safest thing for myself, my employees, the children, and their families?

Alicia Melo, the owner and operator of Little Explorers in Geneva, says she tossed and turned each night in late March, unable to sleep as she tried to decide what to do.

On the one hand, she has a mortgage on her child care building to pay. She's a divorced parent with three kids. She employs trained, highly qualified teachers and doesn't want to lay them off and lose them. She estimates that she can close for three weeks without taking out a business loan. And that's only if most of her families continue to pay despite the closure.

On the other hand, her youngest child has asthma, and is thus at greater risk from the coronavirus. And Melo says she knows deep down that no child care is truly safe right now, even with the staff constantly sanitizing and disinfecting and praying no one gets sick.

As Melo explained the perilous safety situation to a dubious mom near the child care entrance last week, she and the mom watched as a boy pretended to be a dog. He put a toy in his mouth and growled. Then he took the toy out of his mouth and handed it to the mom's baby. The baby put the toy in her mouth. And then the baby's older brother came up and gave the baby a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

“I see what you mean now,” the mom said.
“I told the city administrator, ‘How would you like it if unrelated people came up and licked you right now?’” Melo says. “Because that is what’s happening at child cares all day, every day.”
After many sleepless nights, Melo made the excruciating decision to close March 30. It is the first time Little Explorers has closed for even one day since it opened in 2010. She’s asking her families to continue paying in the short term, though she isn’t sure how many will.
She has no idea how she will make it through the coronavirus crisis. She hopes that making the decision to close will make it easier to sleep.
“This is very, very, very hard,” Melo says. “Basically, we feel guilty if we are open. And we feel awful if we are closed.”
By Matthew Hansen

LJS: They can't meet at the Capitol, but technology is keeping state senators together

While Nebraska state senators wait to find out when and if they will reconvene this year to finish up the final 17 days of the 2020 session, some have been communicating via Zoom and other technology.
One Omaha political observer, Ricky Fulton, noticed the Zoom activity among senators and was prompted to send a letter to Speaker Jim Scheer asking if meeting on Zoom was any kind of open-meetings violation.
He also wanted to know how many senators could legally meet on a Zoom chat. And whether those who don't use Zoom or other type of video conferencing would be left out of such meetings.
Shortly after the Legislature decided to stop meeting for a while to flatten the curve of spread of the coronavirus and keep senators safe, at least seven members met on Zoom to "communicate responsibly," as they called it.
Senators more recently received a briefing on Zoom about COVID-19 by the University of Nebraska Medical Center.
Lincoln Sen. Anna Wishart said she's been in contact with her fellow senators one to two hours a day during this stay-at-home-as-much-as-you-can directive. With that, her phone time and screen time have escalated.
She texts, Zooms, emails, watches webinars, and is on conference calls.
"The members of the Legislature are like my second family, and so a lot of us are communicating on a daily basis like we do with our primary family, just to ensure that they're doing OK, too," Wishart said.
In answer to Fulton's questions, Scheer said as long as senators don't have a quorum in their virtual meetings, which would be 25 senators, there's no infraction.
And he doesn't know that any committees are getting together, which can be seven to nine senators, because all the committee work is basically done.
The interpretation of legislative rules he is using is that senators must be in the chamber at the Capitol to be able to vote. And he is reluctant to change the rules, because Zoom has proven to be somewhat unreliable, with hackers being able to inject themselves into meetings.
Technically, could a hacker of a legislative Zoom meeting change the outcome of a vote, he asked. Good question.
For his part, he's just learning about Zoom, and doesn't tweet or use Facebook. But he does know about phone conference calls. And Zoom adds visual to the audio, he said.

Just like the real world, he said, he can tell a lot more from a conversation if he's looking at a person versus just listening, to know if the person is understanding what he is saying or whether he needs to back up and say something in a different way.
The COVID-19 briefing with UNMC doctors was not much different than if senators had been gathered at a social event, he said.
A lot of the Zoom meetings he has heard about are senators getting together in much-smaller groups.
"I think a lot of it, as well, is just social," he said. "A great number of these people have become very, very good friends."
Although they say they are going to talk about various issues, he said, he suspects 95% has nothing to do with any type of legislative work.
Scheer doesn't know when he might call senators back into session. In some number of weeks, cases will peak and start coming down, he said.
"At some point in time it's just going to be a gut call," he said. "It's not going to go away. Like any other virus, it's still going to be there. ... (But) I'm hoping that it will be minimal enough that people will feel safe reconvening and finishing the session."
By JoAnne Young

LJS: LIBA endorses Hilgers, Campbell for Legislature

The Lincoln Independent Business Association on Thursday endorsed Sen. Mike Hilgers and Jacob Campbell in two Lincoln legislative races.
Hilgers is seeking reelection in District 21, which is comprised of northwest Lincoln and Lancaster County.
Campbell is seeking the District 29 seat that is being vacated by Sen. Kate Bolz, who will be term-limited out of office at the end of the year.
District 29 spreads across south-central Lincoln.
LIBA said Hilgers and Campbell "best represent the issues that LIBA fights for on a daily basis," including tax reform, growth and economic development, reduced regulation, reduced government spending and providing a resource for small businesses.
"Many local businesses are struggling right now amidst the coronavirus pandemic and Lincoln businesses need help now more than ever," LIBA stated.
Hilgers is a Lincoln attorney; Campbell is a former child abuse investigator for the state and a legislative staffer.
Both candidates are Republicans seeking seats in the nonpartisan Legislature.
By Don Walton

OWH: $1.68 million contract awarded to complete final repairs on levee protecting Valley, Fremont

Final repairs will get underway this month to the damaged levee that protects Valley and parts of Fremont from the Platte River.
The Omaha District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers last week awarded a $1.68 million repair contract to KEU Inc. of Vancouver, Washington.
The Union and No Name Dikes reduce the flood threat to more than 1,300 structures and property

worth $1 billion, according to the corps.
“Getting this contract awarded is a significant milestone,” said Justin Ketelsen, project manager.
The levee protects 23,000 acres including Valley, a town of 2,300, and the southern part of Fremont. Valmont Industries, meatpacking plants, other industries, agricultural lands and sandpit lake communities like Ginger Cove and Ginger Woods also are protected by the levee.
About a mile of the 9.8-mile levee sustained damage.
In last year’s flood, most of Valley’s homes took on water, and its roads, culverts, sewer system and park were damaged.
If all goes according to schedule, the levee reconstruction should be completed by mid-August, said Michael Glasch of the Army Corps of Engineers.
Fully repaired, the levee protects against so-called 50- to 100-year flooding; in other words, flooding that has a 1% to 2% chance of occurring in any year, according to the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District.
The corps will cover 80% of the repair costs, and the NRD will pick up the rest.
The levee was built in 1919 and has been overtopped only twice, in 1978 and 2019.
By Nancy Gaarder

AP: New hearing ordered over lawyer fees in Keystone XL case

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The Nebraska Supreme Court ordered a new hearing Friday in a dispute over who should pay the lawyer who represented landowners against the developer of the Keystone XL pipeline when the company was trying to gain access to their land.
The landowners along the old proposed route have argued that TC Energy, formerly TransCanada, should pay their attorneys' legal fees.
Company officials had tried to invoke eminent domain so they could run the pipeline through the property of 40 Nebraska landowners who objected to the project on their land.
Those cases were still pending when the state Supreme Court issued a separate ruling that threw into question whether the company's planned route through Nebraska was constitutional. In response, TC Energy dropped its eminent domain cases and chose to reapply for a new route, but landowners argued that the company should have to pay the costs of the lawyer who agreed to represent them.
An Antelope County judge initially ruled in favor of the landowners and ordered TC Energy to pay their legal fees, but the company appealed. A district court judge who heard the case reversed the decision and sent the case back to the county court for another hearing.
Meanwhile, the state Supreme Court ruled in a similar case that TC Energy didn't have to pay the legal fees of landowners in two other counties.
Based on that ruling, the Antelope County judge concluded that a new hearing wasn't necessary. The landowners appealed that decision to the district court, which again ordered the county court to hold a hearing. TC Energy responded by appealing to the Nebraska Supreme Court to resolve the dispute.
“By concluding that the ordered ‘rehearing’ was pointless ... the county court deviated from the district court's mandates, which it lacked the authority to do," Justice John Freudenberg wrote in the opinion.
The 1,200-mile (1,930-kilometer) Keystone XL pipeline would transport up to 830,000 barrels (35 million gallons) of crude oil daily from western Canada to U.S. refineries.

It was rejected under the Obama administration over climate change worries and other environmental concerns, but was revived after President Donald Trump took office.
If completed, the pipeline would carry oil from Canada through Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska, where it would connect to an existing pump station in Steele City, Nebraska. From there it would continue through Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas until it reaches Gulf Coast refineries.
By Grant Schulte

LJS: South Beltway project clears financial obstacle, remains on schedule for 2023 opening

The South Beltway remains primed to open on schedule after the state's contractor secured financing that pandemic panic in financial markets derailed last month.
Nebraska Department of Transportation Director Kyle Schneweis announced on Friday that Hawkins Construction of Omaha had shored up its ability to fund construction of the 11-mile east-west freeway.
In a project decades in the making, state lawmakers last year passed a new funding mechanism to allow the state to spread out payments for the South Beltway over an eight-year period while construction concluded in three years.
Hawkins was the only bidder on the project, and the state agreed to go forward with its $352 million construction plan.
But just as Hawkins was ready to seek financing, concern over the COVID-19 crisis prompted investors to pull more than $12 billion from the municipal bond market, where cities, schools and other issuers sell their debt to finance projects.
Department of Transportation staff have worked with Hawkins staff since March 23 to resolve the problem, Schneweis said.
Hawkins staff kept in contact with their financial advisers, said Chris Hawkins, the company's chief operating officer.
"By staying diligent and persistent, we were able to jump through a tiny window that opened up in the market, completing our bond sale in full only eight days after initially planned," he said in an email, noting the municipal bond market returned to disarray within the next business day.
Their bond sale marked one of the few at the time, and getting it done had a notable cost, he said.
But that cost was worthwhile in the interest of keeping the South Beltway on track, Hawkins said.
"Today is a good day," Schneweis said in a news release.
“When we are able to provide our industry partners the freedom and the flexibility to deliver, Nebraskans win. Neither the NDOT nor the Hawkins team skipped a beat in reacting to safeguard the project’s schedule."
The freeway will connect Nebraska 2 southeast of Lincoln with U.S. 77 southwest of Lincoln and aims to improve traffic flow through the city by giving non-local freight traffic a means to pass around Lincoln.
Early construction on the three-year project has continued all the while, as crews build box culverts, make drainage improvements, and clear shrubs and trees.
Traffic closures are set to begin in May.
By Riley Johnson

OWH Editorial: Nebraska, let's continue to stay the course against the virus

Nebraska, from indications so far, has been able to hold off the most severe spread of the coronavirus. We're doing things right, even though these emergency measures are extreme and, in terms of our economy, painful. To avoid the worst blows from COVID-19 seen in some of our cities and in some countries, we need to stay the course.

A World-Herald analysis on Sunday provided a measure of hope: Nebraska, on a per-capita basis, currently is doing well compared to other states in regard to confirmed COVID-19 cases and related deaths. A caveat, of course, is that Nebraska has far to go in implementing coronavirus testing that reaches the breadth of the state's population.

Nebraskans have adopted needed habits, difficult as some of them are, during this crisis — the regular hand washing, social distancing, donning a mask in public and holding to stay-at-home routines as much as possible. Schools and universities have switched to online instruction. Some businesses, as directed, have closed their doors; others are helping customers follow social distancing.

Nebraska isn't unusual in adopting these public health principles. On the contrary, they're currently being used by people and institutions in nearly every country around the globe. Health officials universally recommend them as fundamental actions to contain the spread of the disease.

The dedication of so many Nebraskans on the front lines — health care staff, first responders, grocery store employees and so many more — is inspiring.

Many Nebraskans have shown great thoughtfulness and kindness in coming up with creative ways to stay connected with, and show affection to, elderly and disadvantaged individuals shut off from direct contact.

It's encouraging, too, to see Nebraskans step forward to continue purchases from local businesses under stress during this troubling time. One vehicle for helping is Buy Local, an online marketplace where customers can purchase gift cards from local businesses. Here is a link for the Omaha area: https://localbusiness.lee.net/omaha-world-herald

This is a difficult, unsettling time in our lives, no question. But as Nebraskans are now seeing, the soundest path forward against the virus is to stay the course.

OWH Editorial: Events once again show Nebraska's need for a robust rainy day fund

The virus crisis lamentably has put the brakes abruptly on Nebraska's economy, and it looks likely the state government will need to draw on its cash reserve. In other words, painful events once again are reminding Nebraska state leaders to take their obligation seriously to maintain a robust rainy day fund.

State leaders last year began building back the cash reserve after it had fallen from $700 million at the start of 2016 to only $300 million at the start of 2019. Funds had been drawn off for one-time capital construction projects and other needs. That decline prompted a sharp warning from the Legislature's Planning Committee that the state was putting its fiscal health at risk by failing to provide a responsible budgetary cushion.

The Legislature responded in 2019 by increasing the cash reserve, and this year the proposed budget adjustments from the Appropriations Committee, approved on first round of debate so far this year, would bring the fund to an estimated $731 million at the end of the current two-year budget period. The $731 million figure would be near the recommendation from the national Government Finance Officers Association that cash reserve balances be equal to at least 16.7% of annual general fund

appropriations.
The Legislature's budget proposal was based on the pre-COVID-19 economic situation, however. As everyone knows, things now have changed in the blink of an eye, with an abrupt slowdown in the economy.
No one can say with certainty at this point how much the state will need to draw down the cash reserve, given how the virus situation is so filled with question marks. One figure mentioned so far, under an economic model, is a possible 10% drop in state revenues for the fiscal year ending June 30. That would mean a revenue reduction of $500 million.
How much help the federal government might provide in budgetary aid is uncertain. What's clear is that the Legislature, whose session currently is suspended due to the virus situation, will have considerable budget work ahead once legislative activity resumes.
Over the years, Nebraska lawmakers and governors have regularly debated how large a cash reserve the state needs. There's room for honest disagreement over the exact figure. Replenishing the rainy day account is routinely in competition for other legitimate needs such as tax relief and increased spending. The cash reserve provides funds for new one-time capital construction projects. Until the recent downturn, Nebraska's economy had been generating a steady increase in government revenues, which tended to move the cash reserve down the priority list a bit compared to other needs.
But experience shows how suddenly the revenue picture can change. What Nebraska certainly should never repeat is the debacle at the start of this century when the post-9/11 economy staggered and Nebraska leaders found they'd left pitifully little in the cash reserve — only $45 million to close a $220 million budget gap.
This situation needs to be a reminder to leaders throughout Nebraska state government of how quickly fiscal circumstances can change, and how vital it is to be attentive to maintaining a healthy cash reserve. It's a lesson, too, for Nebraskans considering future runs for elected positions at the State Capitol. In state government, there's no escape from the need for responsible fiscal discipline.

OWH Editorial: Those facing domestic violence need to know that help is available

One of the many problems from the virus emergency is that it's worsened the chances that domestic violence may erupt in some households. The state Department of Health and Human Services this week provided useful information and advice to help.
"We are all feeling a lack of control in our day-to-day lives right now," observes Sheri Dawson, director of the Division of Behavioral Health. "An individual who cannot manage, will take it out on their victim. Survivors already in an abusive situation will likely face more extreme violence when they can no longer leave by going to work, visiting with family and friends."
Support for an abused individual from friends and relatives during this time can be invaluable. As Dawson says, "Social connectedness and safety planning with friends and family have never been more important." One option, she says, is to have a seemingly innocuous code word or phrase, sent through messaging to a friend or relative, to signal a need for help. The code word could have an agreed-upon meaning such as "call me now, so I can move to another room" or "please call the authorities."
These are sobering possibilities to ponder, but dealing with domestic violence unfortunately requires such measures. The priority must be an individual's safety and emotional health in the face of threat. Domestic violence, after all, isn't restricted to any single group of individuals by income, race or

background.
Abusers attempt to assert control in various ways, and the harm can take forms besides violence. During the current virus emergency, HHS says, abusive partners may withhold necessary items for coping with the virus situation, such as hand sanitizer or disinfectants.
Local and national services are available to help. The Nebraska Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence, at https://www.nebraskacoalition.org/get_help/ and (402) 476-6256, is one resource. Another is the Nebraska Family Helpline at (888) 866-8660.
In addition, nationally there is the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-799-7233 (or log onto thehotline.org or text LOVEIS to 22522); the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network 1-800-656-4673; and the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline, 1-866-331-9474.
The website for the National Domestic Violence Hotline recommends that abused individuals have a personal safety plan and offers information on developing one at this site: https://www.thehotline.org/help/path-to-safety/, and more information is available here: https://www.loveisrespect.org/for-yourself/safety-planning/interactive-safety-plan/.
Every partner in a relationship deserves respect and safety. It's important for friends and family to be prepared to help, and for survivors to know that supports are available.

OWH Midlands Voices: Insights from St. Ignatius can provide reassurance and comfort

The writer, Ph.D., is the president of Creighton University and a Jesuit priest.
Today, as Christians worldwide celebrate an Easter Sunday unlike any in living memory, I join in unity with them, and with those of other faith communities and those of no particular religious tradition, in praying for healing in our world.
During this unprecedented time, with the uncertainty, sickness and suffering resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, I believe there is wisdom in Ignatian spirituality that can offer any of us insight, even comfort.
St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, was born of a noble family in northern Spain in 1491. After being wounded in battle, he experienced a religious conversion so profound that he turned his life over to God.
Deeply moved by the consolations of grace in his life as well as a desire for others to better know God, Ignatius authored the Spiritual Exercises, a powerful and practical set of meditations, instructions and prayers that invite people to find God working in their own lives, and in the world around them. At the end of the 15th century and at the cusp of the Modern Age, it was a true gift to the church and the world that is rich and wise in the practice of discernment. As these existential encouragements and directives have provided spiritual guidance to multitudes across the ages, they are especially poignant today.
As Ignatian spirituality espouses — and is ever-more conspicuous in this time of global pandemic — we live in a world that is both broken and at the same time filled with the grandeur of God. The reality of both Good Friday and Easter Sunday are ever-present in our own lives.
Ignatian discernment teaches us about the reality of desolation and consolation for each of us. Desolation is an emptiness, a heaviness, a sense of darkness in our lives, and we can feel complacent, distracted, duplicitous, disconnected and maybe depressed. Ignatius and other mystics would refer to it as "the dark night of the soul." Through doubt, discouragement, self-pity, cynicism, guile and secrecy, it can build upon itself. It entraps us, and deflects and repels others.
Alternatively, consolation is akin to the sensation of fullness, a lightness and ease of heart. It fosters

peace, calm, generosity and a sense of contentment. Through hope, courage, excitement, optimism, genuineness, confidence and connection, consolation rushes outward and attracts others.
When Ignatius talks about discernment — when he speaks to the decisions we might make and the actions we might take — he asks us to gauge the feelings of desolation and consolation. They are the spiritual moods of our souls, and we should trust them.
Our days now are filled with insecurity, a true sense of surrender, an awareness of sickness, suffering and even death. At the same time, we celebrate first responders and health care heroines and heroes, creative moments of connection with family and friends, insights about our lives, a reframing of priorities, flashes of beauty, great hope and a sense of life that will be restored and renewed.
Truly, the interplay of Good Friday and Easter Sunday is powerfully at work.
A wise theologian once reminded me that you cannot have one without the other, and she is right. True love is never without moments of great pain and confusion; and beauty and deep consolation. And that, really, is the core message of Christ's passion: God's unconditional love for the world; loving all of us in it, and loving each of us in particular.
Today, in this unique time, as we examine the desolations and consolations in our lives, and as we make decisions and take actions, let us be a human community of mercy, compassion and healing. For Christians, Easter is a time of renewal and hope; let us share that reality broadly.
Happy Easter from Creighton University, and may the promises of springtime burst forth in great consolation and abundant hope in our hearts and in our world.
By the Rev. Daniel S. Hendrickson

OWH Midlands Voices: Info-sharing boosts Nebraska's fight against coronavirus

The writer, of Omaha, is a state senator representing District 9 in the Nebraska Legislature. She is chairwoman of the Health and Human Services Committee.
The Nebraska Health Information Initiative (NEHII), in cooperation with the state Department of Health and Human Services, has shown remarkable leadership by rapidly deploying COVID-19 data-monitoring efforts to make a difference in keeping Nebraskans healthy. NEHII's COVID-19 Response Team launched real-time data dashboards that provide health care providers up-to-date, complete information on key needs in regard to COVID-19: Test results for Nebraskans. The availability of beds in the state. And medical supply resources to help fight the spread of the disease.
NEHII currently collects information from the majority of hospitals and health systems across the state through the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP), a data-driven method to fight opioid addiction in Nebraska. However, while all providers participate in the PDMP, not all hospitals and health systems participate with NEHII, which can lead to critical gaps in information at this significant moment in history. The moment coronavirus was detected in Nebraska, NEHII immediately began the process to rapidly include health care facilities, health care providers and labs that were not currently data sharing through NEHII to send admission, discharge, laboratory and other pertinent data related to COVID-19.
A great example of how relevant NEHII is during this crisis is their ability to gather all testing data for Nebraskans.
While the state of Nebraska is able to share test results processed at the state laboratory, NEHII may also gather and access all lab results from private laboratories where tests may be sent due to capacity or overflow. NEHII is working to ensure that a provider can see the results of a COVID-19 test from wherever the results are processed.

As a result, if a COVID-19-positive patient ends up in the emergency room, for example, that provider will now be able to see the results of all screenings and act accordingly because of the robust data connections of NEHII.
The other very exciting data dashboard that NEHII is developing for the state of Nebraska is to monitor the number and types of hospital beds available in the state.
Today, data regarding beds is processed manually. NEHII has the ability to provide real-time connections showing the admissions and discharges from a facility: NEHII can show bed availability the moment it occurs. This dashboard will also help the state monitor recoveries from COVID-19. Work is underway now to identify bed types and other details that are needed beyond a simple count of in and out. I am optimistic that this data dashboard will be available before Nebraska hits the peak of the COVID-19 curve, ensuring that EMS teams, providers and others will know exactly where to send a positive patient with an appropriate available bed.
Finally, there has been a considerable amount of attention to the issue of the need for personal protective equipment, masks and ventilators. This situation has highlighted the need to understand the availability of these crucial supplies in this state. Under normal circumstances, each individual facility knows its needs and has a supply-order process that supports its normal operation. NEHII is currently working with supply chain leaders at health care facilities to automate supply requests and give a more complete view for the state of what Nebraska has for its patients. A supply dashboard developed in the coming weeks by NEHII will assist the state HHS as it is faced with the daunting task of how to distribute supplies that become available from federal partners.
Nebraska is fortunate to have a remarkable partner in NEHII to manage data resources for our state. NEHII's response to COVID-19 reduces gaps in public health data and uses only COVID-19 patient data to ultimately keep Nebraskans healthy during this time of a worldwide pandemic.
By Sara Howard

OWH Midlands Voices: Here's needed info on mail-in voting for Nebraskans

The writer, of Omaha, represents District 8 in the Nebraska Legislature.
Across many platforms, from Facebook and Twitter, to my email, to conversations with my own family members, I have heard questions and confusion about voting by mail in Nebraska. I want to offer some clarity to the thousands of Nebraskans who in 2020 will be voting at home for the first time by responding to some of the most common questions I receive:
Q: How do I vote by mail? A: The secretary of state has sent vote by mail ballot applications to every Nebraska voter, and that is really great news. If you want to vote by mail, you must fill out the application and return it to your county election commission by fax, email or regular mail by May 1. You can also take a picture or scan your request and email it to your county election official. If you've misplaced your application or didn't receive one, you can access vote by mail applications online.
Q: What if I don't have a printer? A: If you can't find someone to help you print off the vote by mail application, call the election official in your county and they will send you an application in the mail.
Q: Isn't this a lot of stuff to be mailing out? What if I don't have stamps? A: To be clear, these are the only two things you have to send to your county election official: your application to vote by mail, and your completed ballot. Note that both the application and the returned ballot require a stamp, because postage is not included. However, there are ways to return both your application and your ballot without a stamp. You can take a picture or scan your application and email it to your county election official. And once you receive your ballot, you can drop your completed ballot in its

envelope at a dropbox location without a stamp.
Q: Who is allowed to vote by mail? A: In Nebraska, any voter may request a vote by mail ballot. Period.
Q: Is "vote by mail" the same thing as "early voting"? A: Yes. "Vote by mail," "vote at home," "early voting" and "absentee ballot" all refer to the same thing in Nebraska.
Q: Will I still be able to vote in person? A: Right now, the plan is to allow in-person voting in Nebraska. The secretary of state and his experienced elections team have thought this through and put many precautions in place to protect poll workers and voters who choose to vote in person.
I have never voted by mail myself. I always vote in person because I love getting the sticker, I love taking the ballot selfie, and I love the excitement of being at the polls on Election Day. But this year, I'll be casting my vote from home. Many of our loyal, hardworking poll workers in Nebraska are in vulnerable populations, at a critical risk for contracting the virus. Even if you are not symptomatic, you could be carrying the virus and could unknowingly spread it if you leave home to go to a polling place. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the responsible thing for every Nebraskan to do is to vote by mail from home.
We're very fortunate to have the privilege to vote this way in Nebraska. Many states have barriers to voting by mail, which drives down turnout. In Nebraska, we have to make sure that doesn't happen, and that even in a public health emergency, everyone who is eligible to vote gets the chance to do so. Research shows that the best way to do that is to vote by mail.
By Megan Hunt

OWH Midlands Voices: Farmers don't need this meddling

The writer is a farmer and small business owner from Fremont.
Farming is the backbone of Nebraska. It's more than our state's leading industry; it's our way of life. That's why I was surprised to see a recent article published in Bloomberg Businessweek that mischaracterizes how farmers feel about an agriculture issue in my community.
The issue is called "right to repair," but it is not what it sounds like — it's a misnomer. Farmers like me already have the right to repair and maintain our equipment. This issue has been cleverly named in order to hide its real intention, which is getting access to embedded back-end code for illegal activities. By allowing anyone, including potentially bad actors, access to the source code, it would undermine the safety controls.
The reporters are correct to point out that modern-farm equipment is high-tech and now contains many lines of code. Just think how much farming equipment and practices have changed in the past 50 years. According to the Progressive Farmer, "In 1962, one farmer fed 25.8 persons.
In the 50 years since he has taken on considerably more responsibility and now feeds 155." This is thanks, in part, to the development of new innovative technology like precision agriculture that's on board modern-era tractors.
As tractors have changed to incorporate the latest cutting-edge technology, so have the way users are able to repair them.
Authorized dealers employ highly trained technicians who provide quality service, diagnostic information and equipment repairs. They are also mobile, with mobile repair trucks that are highly equipped to efficiently fix equipment to reduce downtime.
One simple, small mistake by a third-party repair shop, farmer or bad actor could result in destructive consequences.

An equipment expert in the article noted the danger from “a coding mistake by a hacker, or even a well-intended farmer or mechanic, that sends a 500-horsepower combine careening into a farmhouse or through a clutch of workers eating lunch in the fields.”

This unfortunate scenario illustrates why it would be foolish to allow access to software and code that isn’t necessary to complete most maintenance and repair tasks. Thankfully, our state lawmakers understood the unintended consequences that would stem from this kind of legislation.

As a farmer, it also struck me that the article failed to mention that right to repair policies would undermine the great strides the agriculture community has made on environmental sustainability. It would open the door to illegal tampering of emissions controls that are put in place by under the Clean Air Act.

As a proud Nebraska farmer, I want what is best for our agricultural community.

In reality, farmers, dealers and equipment manufactures rely on each other for success. Let’s hope that we can resolve any new issues that arise without government meddling and ultimately creating more problems than solutions.

By Roxie Kracl

OWH Midlands Voices: Hostility to, suspicion of foreigners are deeply embedded in U.S. history

The writer is a professor of history at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and author of the book “Just Like Us: The American Struggle to Understand Foreigners” (Columbia University Press, 2020).

First, the novel coronavirus was a hoax, the White House told us. Then it was identified as a foreign virus. “The Chinese virus,” as President Trump has insisted. Part of them, not of us. The president continues to emphasize what he sees as the foreign character of the disease, and in his wake come verbal assaults on Americans of Asian descent.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be new, but this way of thinking about Americans and their relationship to the world is decidedly not. Imagining themselves as uniquely healthy, affluent, strong and free, Americans have long cast a baleful eye on influences from abroad that seemed likely to pollute the national body politic, whether infectious or intellectual. Immigrants and refugees have regularly topped the list.

Those of us who are older, though, hardly imagined that, in the year 2020, we would live under a president so eager to mobilize racial prejudice and xenophobia. Surely we should have come much further by now?

But our story does not end here. And we have a very different tale from our national past to call upon as we pull together in hopes of building a viable future together. We can manage the current pandemic, we can find a humane path forward to negotiate flows of migration, and we can navigate the overriding challenge of climate change, in no small part by working closely with other nations. Just as the courageous dedication of our health care workers inspires us, so too can remembering the powerful ways in which the U.S. has, repeatedly, become a more inclusive society and now the most diverse great power in world history.

The broader sweep of the American story has been one of incorporating and assimilating newcomers and their descendants. More than 40 million U.S. residents were born elsewhere, nearly four times as many as in Germany, the country with the next-largest number.

Roman Catholics, once reviled in this country, eventually came to be seen as plain old Americans. For the most part, so did Jews, as part of a new “Judeo-Christian” tradition. In comparison to their

reception in most of Europe, Muslim migrants here appear to be on a similar path of relative incorporation. Asian Americans after 1945 transformed from a “yellow peril” to a “model minority.” Latinos have become a crucial part of American society, the U.S. economy and the U.S. electorate. In contrast to other nations with resurgent right-wing populism, the citizens of the United States can hardly deny their own identity as a nation of immigrants and their descendants.

Until quite recently, the Republican Party promoted international trade and investment. It embraced U.S. allies abroad. It welcomed new arrivals as entrepreneurs, people of religious faith, and workers critical to the success of large sectors of the U.S. economy. Republicans need not cling to the xenophobia of Trumpism once Trump, eventually, is gone.

Above all, American popular culture reflects global diversity and interconnectedness. Little is truly foreign to the vast industries of music, film, fashion, sports and food. For younger Americans in particular, the nativism (like the homophobia) of some of their elders is acutely embarrassing. They surely need to show up more regularly at election time, but the enormously diverse younger generations of Americans are not warming to xenophobia. At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, my students are not afraid of foreigners, who comprise more than 10% of the student population.

The dramatic expansion of U.S. influence around the globe after World War II helped force white Americans to resolve their contradictory feelings about foreigners and people of color in the direction of greater inclusion. The 2016 election marked a considerable setback, just as there have been temporary defeats across the U.S. past. But Trumpism is not the end of American history, not by a long shot. Just as we will manage the COVID-19 pandemic better by not pretending it’s a foreign challenge, so can we remember our better angels of inclusiveness that have long made this nation great.

By Tim Borstelmann

OWH: Don’t go the way of Wisconsin

It happened in Wisconsin and it could happen here. Wisconsin, my home state, has just exercised the most horrific voter suppression imaginable. In case Nebraskans haven’t read or heard about what went down, I summarize briefly.

Wisconsin has long had scheduled a primary for April 7. In light of the coronavirus, the governor attempted to push the date forward. The effort failed, first by a judge’s decision, then by the Wisconsin Supreme Court and finally by the U.S. Supreme Court in a 5-4 decision. There are lots of detail and mysterious decision-making that went into the excuses proffered. In addition, in 2011, gerrymandering and new election rules took voting rights away from 200,000 Wisconsin minority residents, and there is a proposal to take voting rights from 240,000 more in 2020. This is unconscionable.

Well, folks, unfortunately, the Wisconsin sham could become the new normal throughout the nation when we get to voting in November. This could be a test case upon which others could build, because each state has its own election policies. Our right to free and fair elections is a constitutional right guaranteed by the 26th Amendment to our Constitution. Protect this right or you may lose it.

I’m writing to encourage Nebraskans to write Gov. Ricketts urging him to keep Nebraska voting open to all feasible methods and to congratulate him on what he has already done. We don’t want to go the way of Wisconsin!

Bryan Hankins, Papillion

LJS Editorial, 4/12: COVID-19 leaves mark on Class of 2020

Dear Class of 2020,

You won't be marching into an auditorium to the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance" at the end of May. You won't be accepting a diploma or a hearty handshake. But you won't be sitting through a long-winded graduation address, either.

Right now, it might seem like you're the unluckiest graduating class in history. It's easy to see all that this pandemic has taken away from you. It may be difficult, but these next few months could very well define your generation.

Although surrendering your senior year may seem devastating -- no prom, no graduation and an uncertain future -- your sacrifice could save lives, which is the greatest expression of love.

Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, you now have opportunity to create and define your new normal, proving your competence and responsibility along the way.

You're not the first senior class asked to relinquish graduation. Many at your age were asked to storm Normandy and track through the jungles of Vietnam. While your obligations are different from those of our forefathers, it is now your turn to do what you can to protect those who are at serious risk.

While your sacrifices may seem high, you have all the resources needed to succeed. You are already masters of social media and digital communication. With the shift to online instruction you've pared back education into the essence of learning.

Navigating the coronavirus will require you to become adept at skills that will serve you well. Working efficiently, connecting healthily and consuming appropriately will become essential in your future.

COVID-19 is only the first of many challenges your generation will face. Climate change, political polarization, immigration and deportation, gun violence, a crippling national debt and potentially another pandemic will all have to be addressed as you are passed the torch.

This burden has been foisted onto you. When you should've been attending proms, playing senior pranks, wrapping up spring sports, sweating finals and hanging with friends, you were remotely learning, socially distancing and flattening the curve.

An older generation will deal with the immediate challenges of this pandemic, but you will help heal the bigger wounds it exposes. You will help define a new normal. You will embody resilience. You will combine the tools of today with the technology of tomorrow to create a happier, healthier life for us all.

Class of 2020, you can do this. Thank you for your sacrifice.

OWH: Ashford joins Eastman in TV battle for Nebraska's Democratic primary

Nebraska Democrats will see three familiar faces — all former elected officials — as lawyer Ann Ashford begins airing television advertising in the Omaha area congressional race.

Ashford's 30-second ad mentions neither of her May 12 primary opponents by name — Kara Eastman, who won the Democratic nomination for the House seat in 2018, and Omaha restaurateur Gladys Harrison.

The ad also doesn't directly target U.S. Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., who will take on the winner of the Democratic primary in November.

Instead, it focuses on her electability and pragmatism, featuring endorsements from former Nebraska governors and U.S. Sens. Bob Kerrey and Ben Nelson and from former Lt. Gov. Kim Robak.
Eastman also has taken her campaign to the airwaves, starting advertising on cable and broadcast television on April 2.
Harrison campaign spokesman Aaron Dickerson said his client, the owner of Big Mama's Kitchen, is not yet planning TV ads.
Ashford's ad briefly references her family's time in Washington, with a picture of her and her husband, former Rep. Brad Ashford, D-Neb., posing with former President Barack Obama.
The ad emphasizes her health care plan, including its focus on restoring Obamacare and adding a public option, for people to purchase subsidized insurance through the federal government. And it nods to the federal fight against the novel coronavirus.
The closest it comes to taking on her challengers is a statement that she's "the one Democrat who can win" a general election in Nebraska's competitive 2nd Congressional District.
Eastman lost to Bacon in 2018, a big year for Democrats nationally, by less than 2 percentage points.
"I want them (voters) to know that I have real plans and real solutions to the biggest challenges we are facing right now," Ashford said.
Ashford has criticized Eastman's support for "Medicare for All" as something that cannot pass in a divided Congress and that might be too extreme for many Omaha voters, a stance shared by Harrison.
Eastman has said she won't apologize for setting difficult goals and working to reach them.
The Ashford ad starts running on cable and broadcast TV stations Friday, part of a "six-figure" buy from a candidate who has struggled to raise outside funds.
In the fourth quarter of 2019, she raised $88,529, based on federal election filings. Eastman raised $203,582. Harrison raised $10,192. Bacon raised $343,410.
Ashford campaign spokesman Eric Aspengren declined to disclose the source of the funds for the ad buy but said the proper forms soon will be filed and become public.
By Aaron Sanderford

AP: Fauci eyes May for 'rolling reentry' of economy

ASHINGTON — The United States' top infectious disease expert said Sunday that the economy in parts of the country could have a "rolling reentry" as early as next month, provided health authorities can quickly identify and isolate people who will inevitably be infected with the coronavirus.
Dr. Anthony Fauci also said he "can't guarantee" that it will be safe for Americans to vote in person on Election Day, Nov. 3.
Rather than flipping a switch to reopen the entire country, Fauci said a gradual process will be required based on the status of the pandemic in various parts of the U.S. and the availability of rapid, widespread testing. Once the number of people who are seriously ill sharply declines, officials can begin to "think about a gradual reentry of some sort of normality, some rolling reentry," Fauci said.
In some places, he said, that might occur as soon as May. "We are hoping that, at the end of the month, we could look around and say, 'OK, is there any element here that we can safely and cautiously start pulling back on?' If so, do it. If not, then just continue to hunker down," Fauci said.
Whenever restrictions ease, Fauci said, "we know that there will be people who will be getting infected. I mean, that is just reality. "

Social distancing guidelines imposed by President Donald Trump are set to expire April 30.
Trump is eager to restart the economy, which has stalled because most Americans are under orders to “stay at home” to help slow the virus’ spread.
But governors will have a lot to say about when to ease restrictions in their states, and the leaders of Maryland and New Jersey indicated Sunday that they are not likely to do so until widespread testing is available.
“The question is how fast we can get enough tests up to speed in order to help us get to the point where we are able to do all of those things," Gov. Larry Hogan, R-Md., said. He said he has set no “artificial deadline."
Gov. Phil Murphy, D-N.J., said the risks of reopening too soon are dangerously high. “And I fear, if we open up too early, and we have not sufficiently made that health recovery and cracked the back of this virus, that we could be pouring gasoline on the fire, even inadvertently," Murphy said.
Increased testing would allow authorities to identify, isolate and trace the contacts of people who are newly infected, Fauci said.
Trump continues to deny continuing problems with the coronavirus testing that’s available, including shortages and long wait times for people to learn results. He’s also resistant to the idea of more widespread testing, saying last week that “it’s unnecessary” and that “vast areas of our country don’t need this.”
Other scientists have echoed Fauci's call for a gradual reopening, where restrictions can be ramped up or down.
Dr. Christopher Murray, director of the University of Washington institute that created widely cited projections of virus-related deaths, said studies show that lifting restrictions at the end of this month would lead to a rebound in the number of infections. Because states don’t really have the capability to deal with a big volume of new cases, he said, “by July or August we could be back in the same situation we are now.”
Officials need to examine whether a state has reached its peak and then allow several weeks of continued closures until fuller testing and contact tracing can be put in place before making a decision, Murray said. But even then, he said, states would have to mindful of putting in place controls to stem “importation” of the virus from other states.
“Maybe some states can open up mid-May, but we have to be very careful and make sure we don’t lose all the effort the American people have put into closures by premature opening,” he said.
Fauci said that, had mitigation efforts been put in place earlier than they were in the U.S., “it would have had an impact” but that many different factors are involved. “It's very complicated.”
Speaking about the prospects of Americans physically going to polling places in November, Fauci said he hopes voting in person can take place.
“I believe that if we have a good, measured way of rolling into this, steps towards normality, that we hope, by the time we get to November, that we will be able to do it in a way which is the standard way,” he said.
“However — and I don’t want to be the pessimistic person — there is always the possibility, as we get into next fall, and the beginning of early winter, that we could see a rebound," he said.
The U.S. has the most confirmed cases and deaths of any nation, more than 530,000 and 20,600, respectively, according to Johns Hopkins University. In hard-hit New York, the number of deaths has topped 700 for six straight days, but the increase in people who are hospitalized is slowing, in a hopeful sign.
By Mark Sherman and Darlene Superville

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