From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 7-23-20
Date: Thursday, July 23, 2020 8:36:54 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Jul 2020	3.02	-24.00	07:44
Corn	Dec 2020	2.92	-41.00	07:44
Milo	Jul 2020	3.11	-15.00	07:44
Milo	Dec 2020	3.18	-15.00	07:44
Soybeans	Jul 2020	8.02	-95.00	07:44
Soybeans	Dec 2020	8.17	-80.00	07:44
Wheat	Jul 2020	4.02	-44.00	07:44
Wheat	Jul 2021	4.00	-80.00	06:36

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KLKN: Another heated debate on Nebraska's Legislative floor
NET: Property Tax, School Finance, Corporate Tax Incentives Debated As Lawmakers Await Fiscal Forecast
KETV: 'We're all a little hot under the collar': Tempers, personal attacks flare-up in legislature
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LJS: State teachers union asks Gov. Ricketts to support mask mandates

The state's largest teachers union sent a letter to Gov. Pete Ricketts asking him to reconsider his opposition to mask mandates, saying his unwillingness to support them is "irresponsible and a dereliction of duty."

The letter, dated Tuesday and signed by Nebraska State Education Association President Jenni Benson, said teachers are eager to reconnect with students but cannot do so without appropriate health measures in place.

“Trying to open schools without adequately protecting students and staff from COVID-19 will backfire. It is putting livelihoods before lives. Platitudes and requests for compliance won’t keep our students safe,” the letter said.

The NSEA represents about 28,000 teachers.

Ricketts, who has encouraged the use of face coverings, has said he is researching the legal authority Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylord Baird has to mandate masks, which she did last week in response to rising COVID-19 cases. He has opposed mask mandates, and told county government officials if they mandate masks in government buildings he will withhold federal pandemic relief funds.

But he also said at a recent briefing that he doesn't oppose the use of masks in school, and that the state Department of Education is taking the lead in reopening schools safely.

Precautions, such as the partitions used for state legislators who reconvened this week, must be taken in schools, the NSEA letter said, and Ricketts must provide sufficient funding to meet the PPE needs of students and staff.

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Schools with high levels of community spread shouldn’t be compelled to reopen and need the governor’s support, the letter said.

Families and school staff need the governor to ensure free and rapid testing upon discovery of a positive case in classrooms and to support school districts’ decisions to suspend contact sports and other extracurricular activities, the NSEA said.

By Margaret Reist

Scottsbluff SH: Some $185k available for workers displaced by virus at WNCC

During the Great Recession, enrollment at two-year colleges increased by about 33%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Now, as the Nebraska unemployment rate creeps upward, hundreds of scholarships are available for workers displaced by the coronavirus at Western Nebraska Community College, or WNCC. College officials geared the scholarships toward vocational training programs.

Gov. Pete Ricketts announced the Nebraska Workforce Retraining Initiative Grant, or WRI, on Wednesday. He said the state had some $16 million from the CARES act designated for worker retraining that had to be spent by the end of the year.

WNCC has about $185,000 in WRI funds intended for scholarships, which the state estimates will average about $1,100 per student, according to Doug Madar, WNCC’s workforce development director. Madar said the amount of money each student receives depends on the program they enrolled in, among other criteria.

The scholarships were limited to students displaced by the COVID-19 closures and economic shrinkage, whether they were laid-off, furloughed, working on temporary contracts or unable to find a job in general, according to a WNCC spokeswoman. The scholarships were also limited to specific programs including: Auto Body, Collision Repair, Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), Basic Nursing Assistant (BNA), Medication Aide, Welding, Class A CDL, Electrician Apprenticeship, Computer Support Specialist, and Heavy Equipment Operator - Skid Steer.

Madar said the college chose those programs because it felt students enrolled there had some of the best chances to get a good-paying job after leaving the program. That, and it was what WNCC could offer in the short timeframe the grant offers.

“To basically be done spending the grant money by the end of the calendar year, and then to have all of the training done by March of 2021, that’s pretty intense,” Madar said. “It came together really fast.”
Students who receive the scholarship will go through the office of Career Pathways & Advising Director Tonya Hergenrader.
Hergenrader said that incoming students sometimes struggle with managing a career transition. She said that typically looks like a student having to balance going to class and working the job they’re trying to leave.
“In this case, most of these people coming in who qualify for this scholarship have been laid off or furloughed or had a reduction in wages so it may not be as much of an issue for them,” Hergenrader said.
For the incoming WRI scholarship recipients, Hergenrader said there were several options to help manage additional financial burdens, including scholarships covering the gap between the WRI scholarship and the remaining cost of attendance.
Hergenrader said her office also offers training for resumes creation, interview skills and employability skills. They even have a few outfits students can borrow for an interview. Her office also helps prospective students choose which program is the best fit for them.
Still, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the idea of getting a job might seem daunting.
“We’re hoping that this opportunity is coming just in time to give (prospective students) some hope, so they can come in and know that there is light at the end of the tunnel,” she said.
The WRI application deadline is Sept. 1. Fall classes at WNCC begin Aug. 17.
By Justin Garcia

NET: Test Nebraska Lab Will Nearly Double Capacity; Program Still Not Reaching Current Capacity

The lab that processes COVID-19 samples for the state’s testing program will expand and be able to handle nearly twice as many tests each day.
Governor Pete Ricketts says the state is adding new equipment to the CHI St. Elizabeth lab in Lincoln that will allow it to process 7,000 tests a day instead of the current 3,600 test capacity as part of the TestNebraska program.
Ricketts says the expansion will help the state keep up with demand, including testing going on at nursing homes across Nebraska.
"So you can anticipate as we get that capacity brought online we will be expanding the opportunities for people to get scheduled to be able to do that testing," Ricketts said Tuesday.
Last week, Test Nebraska averaged between 1,600 and 1,700 tests each day, according to chief medical officer Dr. Gary Anthone.The program accounted for 52% of all tests in the state last week.
That's an improvement compared to June, during which the program averaged about 1,200 daily tests.
Test Nebraska has had the capacity to collect and process 3,000 samples per day since the end of May.
So far, about 94,000 tests have been given through Test Nebraska, and about 242,900 tests have been conducted altogether.
By Jack Williams and Becca Costello

WJAG: Capacity of Test Nebraska lab being expanded

LINCOLN - Since the inception of the Test Nebraska program, over 94,000 coronavirus tests have been done in the state.
During a press conference at the Capitol Tuesday, Governor Pete Ricketts said they’re expanding the

capacity of the Test Nebraska lab.
"We're working with Nomi Health to be able to purchase additional equipment. We'll take the capacity that we have at our current lab that can process 3,600 test a day to now 7,000 tests per day. As we think about the increasing need with schools this fall, that's another reason why we're expanding the capacity."
Ricketts also said they're transitioning from the National Guard conducting tests to health care providers.
Nebraska's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Gary Anthone said they're averaging 1,600 to 1,700 tests done per day and that number is expected to increase once school begins.
For more information or to sign up visit TestNebraska.Com.
By Cody Ronnfeldt

WOWT: Nebraska state senator criticizes COVID-19 signage in the Capitol

OMAHA, Neb. (WOWT) - Nebraska State Sen. Megan Hunt tweeted a riddle Wednesday morning that sparked a social media debate — but shouldn't have, according to the governor's spokesman.
Hunt posted a photo of a sign hanging in the state capitol with information about how to "Keep Nebraskans Healthy" and combat COVID-19.
The post sparked a conversation on Twitter about face masks.
Taylor Gage, who handles communications for Gov. Pete Ricketts, tweeted a reply, saying Hunt's post didn't tell the whole story and "may have been framed to grab attention."
Gage's post included a short video that pans across the hall to a smaller sign, zooming in to show that the second sign — with a headline requesting visitors to practice social distancing while in the Capitol — states that "Masks are highly recommended."
By Gina Dvorak

LJS: Palmtag moves to set the record straight in District 1 election

Janet Palmtag, the District 1 candidate at the center of intense legislative attention this week, said Wednesday she is setting the record straight after deceptive mailers were sent by her own party.
Palmtag, who is running for the Southeast Nebraska legislative seat against Sen. Julie Slama, is firing back about the mailer, which went out in the spring but is still a hot topic. The mailer sent by the Nebraska Republican Party said she sided with Lincoln liberals, atheists and radical extremists, which she says is not true and a character assassination.
She's sending out her own flyers to voters this week.
One includes an apology from Dan Welch, Nebraska GOP chairman, for the party mailer. In that mailer, the party tried to pair her with Sen. Ernie Chambers, who was pictured. She says she has never met or spoken to Chambers, and he says the same.
That flyer has come up numerous times in his speeches on the floor of the Legislature this week, along with comments he's made about Slama that she has called disgusting and vile.
The other of Palmtag's flyers is an effort to set the record straight with voters that she is a strong supporter of the Second Amendment, an anti-abortion Catholic, a lifelong conservative Republican and has been an owner and operator of a successful small business for more than 30 years.
It also says she is endorsed by Republican leaders including Congressman Jeff Fortenberry; former Omaha Mayor, University of Nebraska Regent and four-term Congressman Hal Daub; and former Gov. Dave Heineman.
In an interview with the Journal Star on Wednesday, Palmtag said she hadn't paid a lot of attention to the discussion about the flyer in the Legislature this week in which her name was evoked daily by Omaha

Sen. Ernie Chambers.
"I'm focusing on winning the election, which is taking a lot of time," Palmtag said. "I'm meeting with a lot of people, anticipating that COVID could enter the picture aggressively again, so trying to get a lot accomplished."
She talked about the multiple negative flyers sent out by the Republican Party, which she has been a member of for decades.
"The Slama campaign mailed this flyer to people in legislative District 1 and it basically attacked my faith and my conservative values," Palmtag said. "They called me an atheist. I am a Catholic."
Another mailer said she was not pro-Second Amendment, also not true, she said. And another linked her to Sen. Megan Hunt, who has said she is a progressive atheist, but whom Palmtag said she barely knows.
"It was an unethical, misleading and outrageous example of lying in politics," she said. "It was very disappointing."
Slama should not have allowed it, Palmtag said, but when she did, she should have taken responsibility for it and apologized to the district voters and to Palmtag for that character assassination.
When asked about that Wednesday, Slama said only that she remained focused on the real issues facing her district, including property tax relief, broadband expansion and COVID-19 and flood recovery, and would not talk about the flyer.
Palmtag said it was disturbing that Gov. Pete Ricketts said he supported the dishonest ad. She said she has helped many politicians she believed in, and had worked on fundraisers as far back as Congressman Doug Bereuter and as recent as campaigns for Fortenberry and U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer.
"I have been contacted by many people in the GOP, saying they had no knowledge of those ads whatsoever," she said.
Palmtag said people in District 1 she talked to believed the ad and were surprised to learn she wasn't an atheist, but instead is Catholic.
"We are focusing on the issues and trying to right the wrong," she said, "and get the truth out."
Palmtag said since a letter went out from Heineman and former U.S. Sen. and Gov. Bob Kerrey supporting her, her fundraising has gone up.
"I have a lot of support coming my way," she said.
Meanwhile this week, the Nebraska and Lancaster County Republican parties have called for the expulsion of Chambers for comments about Slama they said were sexist and disgusting.
The Nebraska Constitution allows for senators to be expelled but provides no guidance about when or how to do that, except to say it would take 33 votes.
Speaker Jim Scheer was unsure how it would even be done, and said senators instead were focused on the work of the Legislature they have in front of them in the next 14 days.
By JoAnne Young

NCN: Ricketts Calls Chambers' Comments Hateful

LINCOLN – Gov. Pete Ricketts issued a statement Wednesday condemning what he calls hateful rhetoric from state Sen. Ernie Chambers.
Ricketts: “For far too long, Senator Chambers’ hateful rhetoric has gone unchecked. It is beneath the dignity of the Unicameral, and the citizen legislators who serve it. I condemn Ernie’s sexist slurs against women and his disgraceful remarks towards law enforcement.”
The governor’s statement follows remarks attributed to Chambers on the floor of state Legislature on Monday.
The Nebraska Young Republicans and State Sen. Julie Slama earlier condemned the remarks.
Sen. Slama of Peru said Chambers directed a hypothetical at her of being enslaved and raped.

Slama called Chambers' comments about "fleshly favors" and other comments disgusting.
Omaha Young Republicans tweeted their agreement.
Young Republicans Tweet: "Sen. Chamber' comments regarding our colleague have no place in Nebraska politics or civil discourse. The statement that ambitious young females only achieve success through "favors of the flesh" is cowardice and demeaning.
https://governor.nebraska.gov/press/gov-ricketts-condemns-sen-chambers-hateful-rhetoric
https://twitter.com/SenatorSlama
By Dan Swanson

KNEB: Legislature votes to halt changes in youth rehabilitation and treatment centers

Lawmakers pushed back on a recent Department of Health and Human Services' decision to close its Geneva juvenile detention facility and move the girls living there to the Hastings Regional Center.
Senators voted on July 20 to advance LB1140 including two new amendments that deal with the state's youth rehabilitation and treatment centers. One amendment would postpone any transfer or closing of state youth rehabilitation and treatment centers until March 2021 to have more time to finalize a plan and require considerations from stakeholder input, taxpayer investment and communities involved in the change.
The vote came on the first day of the summer session, which was the 44th day of the 2020 legislative session. Due to COVID-19, senators were dismissed from the Legislature in early March.
Speaker Sen. Jim Scheer of Norfolk said that bills with a financial impact will have to be placed on hold until the state's revenue forecasting board meets on July 23. He wants to confirm there will be money available in the budget before moving forward on those bills.
Scheer also expressed sympathy to lawmakers who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. He offered his condolences to Sen. Tony Vargas of Omaha who lost his father to COVID-19 in New York.
Scheer reminded senators that decorum and courtesy are good things and to not take differences personally during debate.
"Let's get on with the people's business and accomplish as much as we can," Scheer said.
The Legislature's Health and Human Service Committee introduced LB1140, which would change provisions related to youth rehabilitation and treatment centers and placement of juveniles. These changes include providing health care, medical services, programming, education, treatment and recreation for each juvenile in YRTC care. There would also be policies in place to separate juveniles based on gender.
The two LB1140 amendments, proposed by Sen. Sarah Howard of Omaha, were a rebuttal to a July 15 decision by Gov. Pete Ricketts' administration to close the Geneva program and move all the girls living there to a new facility in Hastings. All girls located in the Geneva and Kearney YRTCs would be sent to a newly constructed building at the Hastings Regional Center that accommodates 24 girls. These changes would fully separate boys and girls in the YRTC system.
The new Hastings Regional Center was originally supposed to be a chemical dependency program, but now that program will be moved to the Whitehall YRTC campus in Lincoln.
"We appropriated $5 million for a chemical dependency program, not for a YRTC in Hastings," Howard said.
Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha said she felt blinded by Dannette Smith, the CEO of the State Department of Health and Human Services, when Smith announced that female youths will be moved from Geneva to Hastings Regional Center in October.
Sen. Lynne Walz of Fremont said DHHS sent out a notice to local government only four hours prior to a press release being sent out.

“A hasty move has many costs,” Walz said. “It’s how the lack of consideration and thoughtful planning can negatively affect the lives of Nebraskans but also realize that the stakes and lack of planning is something that costs our state big money.”

Sen. Matt Williams of Gothenburg encouraged senators to follow the experts on YRTC such as Howard and members of the Health and Human Services Committee so that senators can better understand the importance of the amendments.

“We need to take a step back and hit the pause button,” Williams said. “This can get out of control if we don’t do this; decisions are being made without any input and without the oversight of the legislative body.”

Another topic of debate was Sen. Julie Slama of Peru’s attack ad against state legislative candidate Janet Palmtag for siding with “radical” Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha that many Republicans and Democrats have called racist.

Chambers called for Slama to apologize not to him but to Palmtag. Other senators also called for Slama to apologize for the ad, including Cavanaugh.

“If this isn’t who you are, stand up and say it isn’t who you are,” Cavanaugh said.

Slama said Chambers’ comments against her were sexist, and that she will continue to focus on the issues important to Nebraskans.

“He can go after me, but I’m focused on the people of Nebraska,” Slama said.

In other legislative news, several bills were advanced to enrollment and review, including LB1166, a bill introduced by Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon that would change school district membership requirements, and LB1080, a bill introduced by Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha that would require school policies prohibiting sexual contact between teachers and students and former students.

By Katie Anderson and Luna Stephens

GII: State delays move of girls from Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center at Kearney to Hastings

Hastings leaders are applauding the Nebraska Legislature’s vote to delay moving girls from the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center at Kearney to Hastings until March 2021.

Hastings Mayor Corey Stutte said the vote to stall the move is good because there is need for strategic planning before the YRTC program moves to the former Hastings Regional Center, which is currently used for a chemical dependency program.

Stutte said Danette Smith, the CEO of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, hosted a meeting Tuesday to answer more questions from local leaders and community stakeholder.

A concern that Stutte hopes will be addressed by DHHS in the future is the fate of the current employees who work for the dependency program in Hastings.

Stutte said the employees cannot be simply retrained for the YRTC program.

“We hope we can keep the chemical dependency program here in Hastings,” Stutte said. “The program is what the buildings were made for and the program is successful.”

She said Smith and other DHHS staff members plan to visit Hastings in August to address concerns from community leaders.

“We aren’t against the move, but there are a lot of questions that need to be answered,” Stutte said.

Hastings police Chief Adam Story said the delay gives Hastings and DHHS time to make sure things are done correctly.

“There have been concerns raised by community stakeholders that need to be addressed and answered,” Story said.

He said his goal is to work with the state as a community.

“The key to having success in a program is having community support,” Story.said.
It is important that the state and community work together as one team, he said, as opposed to the city being told what is going to happen.
“There was back and forth dialogue,” Story said of the Tuesday meeting.
Currently, the former Hastings Regional Center is built as an unsecure drug facility, he said. That is a concern raised by law enforcement and other community leaders if it were to host YRTC residents.
State Sen. Steve Halloran, who represents the Hastings area, said an amendment raised by state Sen. Sara Howard of Omaha puts a hold on any YRTC moves until March 30, a deadline for the state to submit a strategic plan on how to deal with troubled youths in the state.
“The amendment addressed the need for strategic planning,” Halloran said.
He said the amendment forces the DHHS to partner with the community and answer concerns from local leaders and stakeholders.
“There are too many questions and not enough answers right now,” said Halloran, who said when the initial plan to move the YRTC residents to Hastings was announced and released in the media, there was no time to address crucial questions.
“This allows more time to address those questions, otherwise there would be no collaboration,” he said.
One concern Halloran raised is the buildings were constructed for a chemical dependency program, not YRTC residents and programs.
He said the building’s security would need to be updated and security fencing would have to be put in place before the facility would be ready for use by the YRTC.
“If the YRTC program is moved to the Hastings facility without security updates, the facility would be destroyed like it was in Geneva,” Halloran said.
Another concern he addressed is the Legislature has appropriated $500,000 to repair and update the center at Geneva, which would go unused if the program moves to Hastings.
The amendment gives the Legislature oversight through the Health and Human Services Committee, which will study and approve final YRTC moves.
“Ultimately, my hope is that Hastings can keep the substance abuse program and the girls can move back to Geneva,” Halloran said.
State lawmakers pushed back Monday on a recent decision by the Gov. Pete Ricketts administration to close the youth rehabilitation center in Geneva and transfer the girls treated there to the former regional center in Hastings.
“Unfortunately, HHS has hastily suggested another plan,” Howard said of the proposed closure. “This was not the result of planning or consultation ... or consideration of the impact on communities.”
The state’s two Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers have been in turmoil for the past year after housing units at the girls center in Geneva were found to have been vandalized and unusable. That forced the transfer of the girls to the boys center in Kearney, the establishment of a center in Lincoln to handle kids with the highest emotional needs, and $460,000 of repairs at the Geneva center.
Then, on July 15 — five days before the Legislature was set to reconvene and consider a package of bills about youth rehabilitation services — DHHS announced plans to close the Geneva center, transfer girls to the former Hastings Regional Center building and move the drug treatment center now at the building in Hastings to Lincoln.
Lawmakers said that separating boys and girls was a good idea but that closing Geneva and relocating the drug treatment unit would disrupt two successful programs and would be a waste of the $460,000 spent to fix up the Geneva campus.
Sen. Mike Groene of North Platte warned legislators about “micromanaging” the operation of the youth treatment facilities, which are the responsibility of the executive branch. But Omaha Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh said lawmakers have a proper “oversight” role after being “blindsided” by the proposed

changes.
Legislative Bill 1140 won second-round approval after Howard's amendment was adopted. It was one of a handful of bills dealing with the Youth Treatment and Rehabilitation Center that were advanced on Monday.
By Carissa Soukup

AP: Nebraska sees surge in positive coronavirus cases this week

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska has seen a surge of people testing positive for coronavirus this week, according to state health officials.
The state health department's online virus tracker on Wednesday showed more than 600 new cases of the virus since the beginning of the week, including 264 cases on Monday and 343 on Tuesday. The state's total stood at 23,190 by Wednesday. The site also shows nine COVID-19 deaths so far this week, bringing the state's total to 310 since the outbreak began.
The increases come as at least one Omaha-area health system reported a testing policy change in the face of testing supply shortages. CHI Health announced Tuesday it would suspend its policy of testing patients for the virus ahead of elective procedures.
The system said Abbott Laboratories, which manufactures the supplies CHI Health uses for coronavirus testing, can't meet current demand for the supplies and informed CHI that it would limit shipment of those supplies over then next four to five weeks.
"By suspending pre-procedural tests, we are able to preserve tests for people experiencing symptoms in the communities we serve," CHI Health said in a news release.
CHI Health centers will continue to perform elective surgeries, despite the suspension in pre-procedure testing.

Kearney Hub: COVID-19 cases back on the rise in Two Rivers district

KEARNEY — Two Rivers Public Health Department has reported 34 new cases of COVID-19 in its seven-county region since Thursday. The cases are in Buffalo, Dawson, Phelps and Kearney counties.
Ten new cases were reported Tuesday by Two Rivers, including four in Buffalo County, four in Dawson County, and one each in Phelps and Kearney counties, according to Christine Fankhauser, emergency response coordinator for Two Rivers.
Ten new cases also were reported Monday: four in Buffalo County and two cases each in Dawson, Phelps, and Kearney counties.
During the weekend, 14 new cases were confirmed: eight in Buffalo County, five in Dawson County and one in Phelps County.
Dawson County's 11 new cases raised its overall total to 891, the most in the Two Rivers region.
Buffalo County has tallied 246 cases since record-keeping began March 20, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
Phelps County's four new cases raise its total to 32, which is third highest in the Two Rivers area. Kearney County's new cases put its current total at 21, the fourth highest.
No new cases were reported in Two Rivers' three other counties: Franklin, Gosper and Harlan. Franklin and Gosper counties have recorded eight and 13 cases, respectively, while Harlan County has confirmed just one.

NTV: Risk dial moves up for South Heartland District Health Department

“The needle on the risk dial moved up from 1.7 last week to 1.9 this week, which moves our district to the top of the “moderate” risk level,” said SHDHD executive director Michele Bever.
“There are several reasons for the shift up from the previous week,” Bever said. “The weekly positivity rate for last week increased from 4.4% to 7.5%, continuing an upward trend that we’ve seen in four of the past five weeks since our lowest rate of 0.7% the week of June 7-13. In addition, we saw 19 new cases last week, which was a 27% increase over the number of new cases the previous week.”
Bever said that the number of close contacts per positive case had improved over the previous week. However, the time it took for test results to come back had increased, and the ICU bed availability in the health district decreased compared to the previous week. “In addition, social distancing and use of cloth face coverings in public are not widespread practices. All of these contribute to a rise in the overall risk level,” she said.
Bever emphasized key prevention actions to reduce the spread of COVID-19: staying at home if we have any symptoms, even mild symptoms that are consistent with COVID-19; keeping six feet between ourselves and others; wearing a face covering as a barrier to keep our germs from spreading to others, especially when we are unable to be physically distanced; washing our hands frequently with soap and water; and cleaning and disinfecting any frequently-touched surfaces.
The levels of risk for COVID-19 spread -- low (green), moderate (yellow), elevated (orange) and severe (red) – are determined using a variety of indicators, including overall positivity rate, weekly positivity rate, trend in number of cases, health system capacity, ability to trace contacts, average number of contacts per case, availability of COVID-19 testing, and availability of vaccine. The risk level also takes into account other factors, such as compliance to social distancing requirements and use of face coverings in public settings.
South Heartland District case counts and trends can be found on SHDHD’s dashboard of local COVID-19 case statistics. This dashboard, along with updates, guidance, news releases and other COVID-19 information and links can be found on the SHDHD website: www.southheartlandhealth.org. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provides daily updates to Nebraska's coronavirus COVID-19 cases on their Data Dashboard at http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Coronavirus.

LJS: Lincoln reports second highest number of new coronavirus cases

Lincoln reported 80 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday, marking the second highest single-day count since May, according to the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.
The new cases bring Lancaster County’s total to 2,597. The total number of deaths remains at 14.
“Today’s significant case load urgently reminds us all to do our part to prevent the spread of the virus,” Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said in a statement.
While new cases are up significantly, few are requiring hospitalization. On Wednesday, a total of 19 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 in Lincoln, with 15 of those patients from Lancaster County.
The number of confirmed recoveries in Lancaster County jumped from 869 to 930, officials said.
Statewide, one new coronavirus-related death was reported Wednesday, raising the total death count to 311. There were 23,486 total COVID-19 cases as of Wednesday night.
Late Tuesday, a release from the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services said a 33rd staff member had tested positive for COVID-19. The employee works at the Nebraska State Penitentiary in Lincoln and is self-isolating at home.
According to a release, 21 of those 33 employees have recovered from COVID-19.
By Sofia Saric

NET: Health Director: Southwest Nebraskans "Are In Complete Denial" Of COVID-19

Pandemic

The head of a health district in southwest Nebraska says she's frustrated with the lack of social distancing compliance in the nine county area.
Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department Director Myra Stoney says they've seen 22 COVID-19 cases over the past week, almost double the number reported over the previous three months.
"I think the people of southwest Nebraska are in complete denial that there is a pandemic," Stoney said.
She says some residents are ignoring social distancing guidelines and aren't wearing face coverings in public places.
Stoney says her department is doing what it can to educate residents about the dangers of COVID-19, but that doesn't always work.
"It's been frustrating when people read non-credible sources that they saw on Facebook or wherever they came up with it, and they want to badmouth what we know is working in our community," she said. "It's extremely frustrating."
There have been a total of 49 cases of COVID-19 in the nine county area and one death.
Cases are also trending up statewide, with an average of 210 new cases per day over the past seven days.
By Jack Williams

OWH: Experts: Nebraska must cut COVID-19 transmission rates for schools to open safely

Safely opening schools in Nebraska cities with elevated COVID-19 levels will depend heavily on lowering viral transmission rates, local health experts say.
Nebraska as a whole, and the Omaha and Lincoln areas specifically, have seen recent upticks in COVID-19 cases.
In fact, daily case counts are high enough in Omaha, Lincoln and some other spots that a team from the University of Nebraska Medical Center said that bringing middle and high school students back into packed school buildings could lead to increased disease transmission.
"If we reopen in a way that is not allowing adequate social distancing of those students, then there's a strong likelihood we'll see cases and transmission among children that will ultimately impact a greater proportion of adults in the communities," said John Lowe, UNMC's assistant vice chancellor for health security training and education.
Lowe's team is offering site visits to help schools to determine what protocols and procedures will maximize safety. Earlier in the pandemic, the team did the same for meatpacking plants and nursing homes.
Many schools already plan to require masks and keep kids apart as much as possible. Officials with the Omaha Public Schools, for instance, plan to open with a 3-2 schedule that will have students attending three days a week one week and two days the next. The schedule will essentially cut in half the number of students in buildings at a given time and provide added space for social distancing.
But Dr. Ali Khan, dean of UNMC's College of Public Health and another team member, said nothing will protect kids from in-school transmission of the virus more than lowering the transmission rate in communities where it remains uncontrolled.
"The No. 1 thing we can do to protect our children is to decrease transmission in our communities," Khan said.
The concern is the disease, once seeded, can spread undetected, given the virus's long incubation period and the time it takes for people to develop symptoms and get tested. Some people don't ever develop symptoms.

If there's a lot of viral spread, Lowe said, it will challenge public health departments' ability to quickly get people who test positive into isolation and trace and quarantine their high-risk contacts.
When the Nebraska Department of Education released draft guidance on reopening schools last week, it included a color-coded scale of risk levels based on local infection rates, hospital capacity and other factors intended to guide shutdown decisions and health protocols.
What it didn't include were numeric thresholds that indicate whether and how schools should reopen in a given community or signal how many cases should trigger a shutdown of all or a portion of a school district.
Lowe noted that local public health departments across the state have adopted various risk dials. But the graphic representations were developed to inform reopening communities, particularly businesses, not necessarily to guide schools.
Instead, school districts are advised to work with their local health departments. Those departments now are working to determine whether their risk dials will work for schools or a new risk assessment is needed.
That local input is important, Lowe said, because some communities have recorded few if any cases and have schools with plenty of room to distance students. As of Tuesday, 24 of Nebraska's 93 counties had not had a case of COVID-19 in the preceding 14 days.
Meanwhile, Khan said, the public health college has developed recommended thresholds, based on an examination of the transmission rates and experiences of 15 countries that have reopened schools.
The thresholds recommend that schools in communities with between 25 and 50 new cases per million people per day (on a seven-day rolling average) consider reopening on a hybrid basis, with masks, physical distancing and hand hygiene.
As of Tuesday, both Douglas and Lancaster Counties stood above the 50-case threshold, according to tallies by the Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln.
Douglas County was reporting nearly 151 new cases a day per million people, based on a seven-day rolling average. Lancaster County tallied almost 142 cases per million people over the same period. The state as a whole on Tuesday stood at almost 109 new cases per million per day, based on a seven-day rolling average.
Khan noted that the 25 to 50 threshold is still four to seven times the reopening threshold of many European countries, which opened schools at rates of about 7 to 8 cases per million per day.
Communities with more than 50 cases per million per day should consider not sending kids back to school, Khan said. But those with fewer than 5 cases per million per day or fewer can reopen with greater latitude, he said, although he recommended that they continue with masking and hand hygiene until the disease is eliminated.
Khan said the public health college recommends prioritizing getting kids in kindergarten though fifth or sixth grade back in school because younger children are least likely to spread the virus and most likely to benefit educationally. It's also easier to keep them in small groups since they spend most of their school day in one classroom with one teacher. A number of countries have opened in phases, starting with K-5 students.
Older students — those between ages 10 and 19 — can spread the virus at least as well as adults do, a recent study from South Korea indicated. However, even that study left unanswered some questions about how kids transmit COVID-19.
Dr. Bob Rauner, president of the Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln, said other groups use somewhat higher case counts. But he said he's "100 percent behind" what the UNMC experts are saying.
Rauner, a Lincoln physician who serves on the Lincoln school board, also noted that the reopening plan the Lincoln district released Tuesday is a draft that will be updated every week.
In general, Nebraska school districts continue to review their options as more information becomes

available, even as they get down to the wire for opening day. The Millard Public Schools, for instance, announced Monday that the district would offer a fully remote learning option for any student, with no medical reason required.

Khan said the public health college also recommends triggers for when schools should consider shutting down: if a school has two cases a week or more than .5% of the school population is infected. Khan said he expected the recommendations to be posted on UNMC's website as soon as Thursday.

Decisions on closings, however, also would be made in consultation with local public health departments, which are developing plans for how cases would be handled.

Lowe said team members recognize that it's crucial to get kids back to school, so they are trying to sort through factors that would help get kids back safely, even given higher rates of transmission in some communities.

Some districts already have upgraded filters in air-handling systems and increased the ratio of fresh air coming into buildings.

Schools will be relying on not just one measure but all of the layered interventions together. The goal is to operate with some level of consistency.

"Coming up with strategies that are really clear," Lowe said, "will help us be in a situation where it's not a day-by-day decision — 'Are we going to have school' or 'Are we going to shut it down.' "

By Julie Anderson

LJS: Legislature deadlocks on property taxes, business incentives

Deadlock in the Legislature.

A last-ditch effort to provide substantial property tax relief stalled on Wednesday, triggering a long-threatened refusal to enact a new state business development tax incentives program to succeed the plan that will expire at the end of the year.

After debate on the much-amended tax bill concluded with insufficient support available to overcome an anticipated filibuster by its opponents, the bill's proponents trapped the business incentives package in a similar position following extensive debate.

Neither measure was subjected to a vote.

In the wake of the deadlock, Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk said he will wait to see if proponents of the two major proposals are able to negotiate some sort of compromise agreement to unlock the logjam before considering whether to attempt to step in himself.

"I'll give them a chance to see where this leads," Scheer said during an interview after action on the two major proposals came to a halt.

"It certainly behooves the body to put something together," he said.

"But I'm a realist," Scheer said, recognizing that may not occur.

Time will be a factor since the coronavirus-interrupted legislative session has only 14 working days remaining and is scheduled to adjourn on Aug. 13, and there is no obvious pathway to a negotiated compromise.

Wednesday's lengthy debate on both issues demonstrated a predominantly rural-urban fissure on property tax reform that is tied to changes in state aid to public schools.

Rural senators had signaled earlier this session that they were prepared to take the business tax incentives proposal hostage if senators did not agree on a substantial property tax reduction plan.

The property tax proposal, which came in the form of an amended LB1106 after the Revenue Committee's original proposal, LB974, had been blocked on the floor, would reduce local property tax valuations and increase state aid to schools.

The result would provide $520 million in additional state aid distributed over three years.

The tax valuation of agricultural land would be decreased from 75% to 55% of actual value, while the valuation of residential and commercial property would drop from 100% to 87% over three years.
The bill would impose a 2% lid on annual spending growth by individual school districts.
"We have a crisis in Nebraska because of our K-12 education's over-reliance on property taxes," Revenue Chairwoman Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn said.
Sen. Tom Briese of Albion said Nebraska is in the midst of "a property tax crisis" with taxes having reached an unreasonable and unsustainable level.
Sen. John McCollister of Omaha said the proposal would be "a step backward" and it is opposed by every school organization in the state.
Sen. Kate Bolz of Lincoln said she wants to be sure that schools with high needs are able to "get the resources they need to succeed."
Sen. John Stinner of Gering, chairman of the Appropriations Committee, took exception to news media suggestions that the Legislature has not sufficiently prioritized property tax relief.
The state currently provides $275 million in property tax relief, and that is the fourth largest item in the state budget, he said.
"Even in tough times we prioritized property tax relief," Stinner said.
Briese, a leader in tying the fate of property tax relief and business tax incentives together as "a package deal," said $275 million is 6% of property taxes levied "and that's not a lot to brag about."
Sen. Adam Morfeld of Lincoln suggested that "we don't have the revenue to do this in a fiscally responsible or sensible way," although there may be options for additional revenue available if Nebraskans decide to legalize medical marijuana or casino gaming when they vote on ballot issues in November.
In debate on adoption of a new business development tax incentives proposal, Sen. Mark Kolterman of Seward, sponsor of LB720, said "it is critical to send this message to decision-makers" as the current Nebraska Advantage plan comes to a halt at the end of the year.
"We need to figure out a compromise where everybody gets something," Linehan said.
Briese questioned whether the tax incentive package is "a good investment for our taxpayers" and whether business development investments would have occurred without an incentive program.
Stinner said business tax incentives are "about revenue growth."
"I have voted for every property tax reduction," he said. "We should have both."
Included in the business incentive package is support for a proposed $2.6 billion mega-project that would locate a new federal disaster response facility at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.
That proposal would require a $300 million state funding commitment that would be matched by $300 million in private-sector donations.
By Don Walton

OWH: Nebraska lawmakers working toward compromise on property tax, tax incentive bills

LINCOLN — State lawmakers debated the two biggest issues of the 2020 session on Wednesday, but neither the property tax relief bill nor the proposal to update the state's tax incentives for business growth has advanced — yet.
The two proposals had been billed as being intertwined — both needing to pass this year — but at least one senator suggested that the property tax proposal was headed for an impasse and the tax incentive bill, coveted by the state's business community, might have to go it alone.
"If that horse can't finish the race, we need to saddle up a horse that can finish the race," said State Sen. Matt Williams of Gothenburg, a banker who says tax breaks have put his hometown on a "trajectory of

success."
But two key senators, Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, the main author of the property tax bill, and Mark Kolterman of Seward, the main sponsor of the business incentive proposal, both said that work on a so-called "grand compromise" would begin tomorrow after a new forecast of state tax revenue — which has been stung by COVID-19 — is released by the Nebraska Economic Forecasting Advisory Board.
"We need to figure out a compromise where everybody gets something," said Linehan, who, as chair of the Revenue Committee, has guided a two-year effort to get property taxes reduced. "We'll sit down tomorrow and figure out what we can do with the money we have."
Kolterman said he's confident that a deal can be struck to pass both bills.
"There's some alternatives being worked on," he said, adding that property tax relief was just as important as incentives for job growth and business expansion, known as the ImagiNE Act.
To bring back either bill for debate and put them on a path of passage, the sponsors would have to show they have support of at least 33 of the 49 state senators, under a rule put in place by the speaker of the Legislature. It didn't appear that either had the magic 33 on Wednesday, but the ImagiNE Act, LB 720, looked closer to that mark.
The ImagiNE Act, which is being pushed by the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce and other state business groups, would replace the Advantage Act, which expires at the end of the year. The Act would provide between $100 million and $150 million in tax breaks a year in its first six years and has been billed as improving the Advantage Act by providing incentives for creation of better-paying jobs ($16.10 an hour and up) that also offer health insurance and other benefits.
Another aspect of the bill would set aside $300 million in state funds as matching money for the massive NEXT Project at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, a proposed $2.6 billion national center for response to pandemics and natural disasters.
"That's a pretty good return on investment," Kolterman said of the $300 million, which he said the state would be foolish to turn down. If the project, expected to create 8,700 high-paying medical jobs, doesn't happen, no state money would be expended, he added.
LB 1106, the property tax measure, would boost state aid to K-12 schools by $500 million over three years, replacing revenue from local property taxes, which would decrease by lowering valuations of property that could be subject to taxes. The goal is to reduce property taxes paid for local education by 15%.
Backers said it was a reasonable solution to the state's historically high property taxes, which, according to the Tax Foundation, rank seventh highest in the nation.
"If everyday Nebraskans could vote on (property tax relief), it would pass overwhelmingly," said Albion Sen. Tom Briese.
The two issues set up a classic bout between legislative heavyweights. The state's education community unanimously opposes the property tax plan, but the state's business and farm groups support it. Meanwhile, the ImagiNE Act is a top priority for chambers of commerce, with farm groups maintaining that property tax reductions are a much bigger issue.
A year ago, a group of mostly rural senators, upset over the lack of progress on property tax relief, led a filibuster that stalled the ImagiNE Act. It was a rare setback for business interests in the 49-member Legislature.
A group of rural senators, led by Bayard Sen. Steve Erdman, again voiced opposition to LB 720 on Wednesday, saying Nebraska's tax incentives are overly generous and tend to reward businesses that would have added jobs anyway. Why, they asked, can tax breaks be so easily given for out-of-state companies to relocate here, when the Legislature cannot grant property tax relief — after years of trying — to those businesses and residents who already live and do business in Nebraska?
Omaha Sen. Brett Lindstrom urged his rural colleagues to not "hold hostage" the ImagiNE Act if the

property tax bill cannot win approval. Perhaps a compromise can be found, he said.
"Unfortunately, sometimes things don't line up," Lindstrom said.
It was urban senators who mostly led the opposition to the property tax plan, which school officials in Omaha, Millard and Lincoln have said will reduce their funding.
"I believe we need to do something," said State Sen. Wendy DeBoer of Bennington. "I don't want to do it on the backs of our children and their education."
North Platte Sen. Mike Groene, one of the leading supporters of the property tax plan, said LB 1106 would be a major economic development boost, putting more dollars to spend in the pockets of farmers, homeowners and businesses who pay high property taxes.
He and other backers of the bill pushed back against opposition from school groups, saying the measure would not place unreasonable limits on local education spending but would provide new, per-pupil aid of more than $2,000 per student after three years and allow school budgets to continue to grow.
"If you're going to wait around for the educational community to support this, it will never happen," Groene said.
But Bellevue Sen. Sue Crawford said that when the Legislature passed a major bill to decrease property taxes in the 1990s, LB 775, it was a much more inclusive process, with all stakeholders involved in crafting the law.
"This is different than a collaborative process from the beginning," Crawford said, saying that education groups weren't engaged.
By Paul Hammel

AP: Property tax measure hits new roadblock in Nebraska

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Attempts to lower Nebraska's property taxes appeared to stumble yet again Wednesday after some state lawmakers argued that the newest package could hurt local K-12 schools by restricting their ability to tax.
Senators debated the bill for about three hours but ended up skipping over it without a vote, leaving its prospects unclear. The only way it's likely to return to the Legislature's agenda now is if leading supporters can show they have at least 33 votes to overcome a filibuster, a tall order given the opposition to the bill.
"It appears to me that we are heading toward an impasse," said Sen. Matt Williams, of Gothenburg. "If that horse can't finish the race, we need to saddle up a horse that can finish the race."
The proposal would substantially boost state funding for Nebraska's K-12 public schools, which are by far the largest consumers of property tax revenue.
Farmers, ranchers and homeowners argue that rising property valuations have shifted an ever-larger share of the cost onto their shoulders, especially in rural areas with huge swaths of agricultural land. Increasing state aid is designed to ease that burden.
The bill would also tighten restrictions on how much revenue school districts can generate locally through property taxes, drawing objections from school officials and teachers. School administrators have said they don't trust state officials to maintain their funding commitments, given the Legislature's history of belt-tightening to balance its budget in lean times.
"I don't think we have the money for this bill, and the money has to come from somewhere," said Sen. Wendy DeBoer, of Bennington, who led the filibuster. "I care about property tax relief, but I'm not going to do it on the backs of our students."
Sen. Lou Ann Linehan, who drafted the bill as chairwoman of the Legislature's Revenue Committee, said lawmakers need to pass it this year. She said home- and business owners in the state's biggest cities are starting to feel the pinch as well as their property values rise, leading to higher tax bills.

“If we do nothing, if we don’t address this, this problem gets worse and worse,” said Linehan, of Omaha.
Sen. Tom Briese, an Albion farmer, said property taxes continue to be the most pressing issue raised by constituents in his overwhelmingly rural district, and he criticized fellow lawmakers for failing to pass the bill.
“If everyday Nebraskans could vote on this, it would pass overwhelmingly,” he said. “But instead we’re doing it, and we’re doing it with lobbyists and special interests in our ear.”
The bill faced uncertain prospects even before the coronavirus pandemic threatened the state budget, leaving some lawmakers wary about spending more money.
By Grant Schulte

OWH: Nebraska lawmakers advance bill that would prohibit local bans on plastic bags

Senators voted 28-10 to add preemption language to Legislative Bill 632, introduced by State Sen. Dan Hughes of Venango. The language bars counties and cities from attempting to regulate the use of plastic bags or any other type of container.
Sen. Rob Clements of Elmwood called the preemption a “pro-business” step that would help businesses keep expenses down. Businesses would benefit by not having to comply with a hodge-podge of local ordinances, Hughes said.
But Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha said the proposal overrides local control and was written by an arm of the plastic bag industry. The industry has been pushing similar laws around the country in response to grassroots efforts to reduce plastic pollution.
Hunt noted that there are no local bans in Nebraska. Last year, Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert vetoed the Omaha City Council’s effort to prohibit plastic bags at stores larger than 10,000 square feet.
Utilities, flood risks addressed.
The Natural Resources Committee made a “Christmas tree” out of LB 632 by hanging several bills on it, including measures addressing utility cut-offs and flooding risks.
One measure would limit the fees that utilities can charge to disconnect or reconnect services and would expand protection from disconnection for households with a disabled or ill member. Sen. Sue Crawford of Bellevue introduced that language, which was drawn from her LB 933.
Another section of the bill, introduced by Sen. Bruce Bostelman of Brainard, would create a flood plan development group. The group would be charged with helping the Department of Natural Resources develop a statewide flood mitigation plan.
Floods have become a higher priority for the state after last year’s widespread damage.
Medicaid prescription coverage.
Medicaid would not be able to force people off psychiatric or anti-seizure medications that are working well for them under a bill advanced to the second round of debate Wednesday.
LB 1052, introduced by Sen. Anna Wishart of Lincoln, would allow Medicaid recipients to stay on their current antidepressant, anti-psychotic or anti-convulsant medications if their doctors deem the drugs medically necessary.
Wishart said the bill takes aim at situations in which people are denied coverage for medications that they have been taking and are forced to go onto something else.
She told of one man’s experience, in which he was denied coverage of a psychiatric drug that had been keeping him stable and out of the hospital for several years.
The man ended up being hospitalized several times. Even after he was allowed to go back on the drug, he had lost ground in his independence.
Tax incentives through time.
As lawmakers debated a new business tax incentive program, Omaha Sen. Ernie Chambers shared copies

of some of the amendments he offered in 1987 to the bill creating Nebraska's first business tax incentive program.
Fears that ConAgra Foods would move out of the state drove support for the program, known as LB 775.
Among the amendments Chambers offered was this: "The inscription on the north face of the Capitol Building shall be corrected to declare: 'ConAgra is the salvation of the State and its citizens.' "
(The actual inscription reads: The Salvation of the State is Watchfulness in the Citizen.)
He also proposed an amendment declaring May 19 as "Corporation Day in Nebraska," during which "no person shall wear a hat," public schools would be closed and students would assemble near their schools at noon and "chant five times in unison: 'God bless corporations.' "
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: UNO and UNMC will lay off nine employees, let other positions go unfilled

A total of nine people have learned they will be laid off this year at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Nebraska Medical Center, the institutions' leaders said Wednesday.
Dr. Jeffrey Gold, chancellor of UNO and UNMC, said in a Zoom discussion with the UNO community that 63 jobs there will be affected by budget cuts.
But about a quarter of those are vacancies that will go unfilled and well over half of them are employees who will simply be paid from a different source of money (such as federal grant money) than before.
Doug Ewald, vice chancellor for business, finance and business development at UNO and UNMC, said after the Zoom session that six will be cut at UNO and three at UNMC. All have been notified, he said.
The NU system, including schools in Lincoln and Kearney, is working on a $43 million cut over the next three years, about $6.3 million of which will be absorbed by UNO.
UNMC faces $6.6 million in cuts. The trims are largely related to the coronavirus pandemic's negative impact on the NU system and higher education in general.
Masks will be expected to be worn at UNO and UNMC, Ewald said, a point that Gold pounded home at the beginning of his remarks to UNO.
"Wear a mask, wear a mask, wear a mask," Gold said.
Gold spoke for about an hour about the UNO situation Wednesday afternoon after holding a similar discussion with the UNMC community in the morning.
The $43 million will be attained by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's trimming 5.5% of its budget; UNO and the University of Nebraska at Kearney 3.9%; and UNMC 2.9%.
Gold said UNO and UNMC planned for several scenarios, including 10% cuts. Ewald told the afternoon virtual town hall meeting that the universities are "in a far better place now than we were" when 10% slashes were considered.
The coronavirus has proven so unpredictable, though, that Gold said projections could be faulty. He said UNO's fall planning includes preparations for nearly normal campus activity and, on the other end, classes provided completely online, as took place in the spring.
"There are two words that I have stricken from my vocabulary — always and never," Gold said of dealing with the pandemic.
As of this week, enrollment projections indicate UNO expects strong undergraduate and graduate student enrollment. The numbers who have signed up are greater than at the same time last year.
Signing a contract doesn't guarantee that a student will show up, though. Last fall, UNO enrolled about 15,150 students.
Ewald said at UNMC, a total of about 4,000 students are expected this fall, which would make it a fairly typical enrollment. Last year, UNMC enrolled 4,055, a record for the institution.
Gold assured UNO that the administration is ready to take on the challenges of fall. He said: "I can

predict that we're going to be as prepared as we can possibly be."
By Rick Ruggles

NET: Nebraska Ranks 4th In Census Responses So Far, But Some Rural Areas Lag

Nebraska ranks fourth in the nation for the rate of households that have responded to the 2020 Census so far. The Census Bureau will start sending workers door-to-door in less than two weeks.
About 68% of Nebraska households have responded to the census, either online, on paper, or by phone. Only three states have a higher response rate: Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Iowa is tied with Nebraska for fourth.
David Drozd is a research coordinator at the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
He says Upper Midwest states usually rank high for census response, partly because their populations tend to be civic-minded.
"Very 'do your duty,' very religious, very volunteering," Drozd said. "And these kinds of factors go into what dictates where the responses end up."
Lincoln has the highest response rate for cities with a population of at least 250,000.
Other parts of the state are lagging, especially in rural areas. Eighteen counties are at least 10% below their response rate in the 2010 census.
Drozd says there's still a lot of room for improvement statewide.
"Even within our urban areas where overall response is good, there are pockets where the hard-to-count population still has a low response rate," Drozd said.
Hard-to-count groups include college students, renters, racial and ethnic minorities, and immigrants.
Census officials look at the self-response rate closely and they want it to be as high as possible. Self-reported data is more accurate, and it saves a lot of money and time when census workers don't have to knock on as many doors.
Nebraska's self-response rate is about 3% lower than it was in 2010, but Drozd said there's still time to close that gap. The Census Bureau is sending out one final reminder by mail this week.
By Becca Costello

LJS: Conservationists reintroduce native mussels in Southeast Nebraska streams

BEATRICE — Carrying buckets and armed in waders and boots, a small team of conservationists arrived at the banks of Cub Creek at Homestead National Monument of America on a hot Wednesday afternoon. Far from a fishing expedition, they were on an adventure of a different kind.
Over the course of about an hour, staff members of Nebraska Game and Parks and the National Park Service stocked about 1,000 freshwater mussels native to the water in hopes to see their populations bounce back once again.
Half were fatmucket mussels; the other half were plain pocketbook. They have been growing at North Platte Fish Hatchery for the past 26 months before being released into the wild to feed on algae and detritus while filtering out E. coli.
Tracking censors about the size of a dime were attached to 100 mussels of each species, allowing researchers to continue to count the population in a proximity sensor that resembles a gold metal detector.
For Dean Rosenthal, Nebraska Game and Parks Fisheries Division administrator, it's a neat project to restock native species back to where they historically found.
Nebraska had 20 to 30 types of mussels in the state's lakes and waterways before many were wiped out

because of water quality issues and other environmental and human factors.
Joe Cassidy, a Game and Parks fish culture supervisor who is involved with the mussels project, said mussels are an important piece of the ecosystem like any other piece of the puzzle.
"You can keep eliminating pieces of the puzzle, or you don't have a puzzle anymore," Cassidy said. "We want to see little ones again, and we don't want to be the ones stocking them.
"But we want to put in moms and dads so four years down the road, we'll have natural reproduction, and things will be back on course."
By Justin Wan

OWH Editorial: Nebraska is right to protect seniors from financial exploitation

A sobering uncertainty hovers over every adult Nebraskan: There's no guarantee that when we reach our elderly years, we'll be able to retain our full mental faculties or health and manage our personal finances properly. Some seniors fall victim to outrageous scams. Others are bilked by guardians in whom they placed their trust.
Vulnerable, too, are nonelderly residents coping with disabilities, mental health challenges, substance abuse problems or other impairments.
The Nebraska Legislature this week gave final passage to a proposal that can help protect individuals from financial abuse. Under Legislative Bill 909, the state will allow financial institutions to put a 30-day hold on transactions reasonably deemed suspicious, including withdrawing or transferring money, changing the owner of an account or changing beneficiaries. Financial institutions also could notify someone close to the customer, such as a known family member or friend, a co-signer on the customer's account or a trustee.
The state should tread carefully in encroaching on an individual's right to manage their money, of course, but the threat from scammers has grown so severe that government action is appropriate. At least 10 other states have passed similar laws.
"This is not a hypothetical situation," said Theresa Heye, speaking on behalf of the Nebraska Independent Community Bankers Association, during a legislative hearing on the bill. "This has been a reoccurring problem."
Mark Quandahl, director of the Nebraska Department of Banking and Finance, similarly described the concern and voiced support for the bill.
Seniors are set to make up a growing portion of Nebraska's population. The state's population aged 65 and older has increased from 246,000 in 2010 to 324,000 now, heading toward 418,000 by 2030.
This new financial legislation builds on action the Legislature took in 2014 when it created the public guardian program to help protect vulnerable Nebraskans against financial exploitation following a World-Herald investigation. Among the examples The World-Herald found was a court-appointed guardian in Omaha who took at least $350,000 from several wards.
Since 2014, the state has trained almost 5,000 court-appointed private guardians and helped more than 600 vulnerable Nebraskans.
The state is right to take such steps to protect seniors. With its latest action, the Legislature is building on its determination to keep Nebraskans safe from financial exploitation.

OWH Midlands Voices: No, the Supreme Court didn't mandate public funding for private schools

The writer is deputy executive director of Stand for Schools, a nonprofit dedicated to advancing public education in Nebraska. He is an attorney who previously served as a nonprofit regulator in the Nebraska

Attorney General's Office.

As the Nebraska Legislature reconvenes, some policymakers who support school privatization may feel emboldened by the U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling on Espinoza v. Montana, but Nebraskans would be wise not to replicate other states' failed experiments of school vouchers or tax credit scholarships.

In 2015, the Montana Legislature established a tax credit scholarship program that would grant a tax credit to anyone who donated to a "student scholarship organization," which would then use those funds to award scholarships to children for tuition at a private school. However, the Montana Supreme Court found the vast majority of dollars went toward religious education in violation of their state constitution, which, like Nebraska's, prohibits any direct or indirect payment of state funds to religious institutions, including schools. As a result, the Court eliminated the program.

But last month, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed that ruling in a 5-4 decision and concluded that once Montana created the program, it could not, under the First Amendment, make a distinction between religious or secular private schools. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Roberts says, "A State need not subsidize private education. But once a State decides to do so, it cannot disqualify some private schools solely because they are religious."

As is typical of the Roberts Court, the decision is more limited in its reach and scope than it first appears. The majority opinion doesn't say Montana's constitutional provision prohibiting state aid to religious institutions is unconstitutional. It doesn't overturn prior precedent that states can withhold funding certain types of religious instruction (Locke v. Davey, 2004). The most important sentence regarding the case is straight from Roberts' opinion: "A State need not subsidize private education." In other words: Just because states can create these programs doesn't mean they should.

And that's something we Nebraskans have long understood. There is good reason we are one of only a handful of states without tax credit scholarships or other voucher schemes. We have excellent public schools. We are fiscally responsible. We believe in accountability, transparency and public oversight of our tax dollars. And we need only look to states that have adopted vouchers to know they do not improve academic outcomes, and they worsen racial and socioeconomic segregation.

The abundance of research on these topics has not, however, stopped some policymakers. In Nebraska, Legislative Bill 1202 would enact a program similar to the one in Montana. Of course, circumstances have changed considerably since LB 1202 was first proposed. A global pandemic closed school buildings and the State Capitol. Our legislators will return to a very different session than the one they left in March. They will be surrounded by plastic barriers and masks — stark reminders of the ongoing threat of COVID-19 that will be impossible to ignore. And instead of a once-projected surplus, senators will be facing a significant reduction in revenue, budgetary shortfalls, dire economic forecasts and extremely difficult decisions.

One decision that shouldn't be hard for our leaders is to support Nebraska's public schools. Diverting hard-earned tax dollars and much-needed resources away from them via tax credit scholarships was never a sound proposal, especially as our state's schools have only been fully funded in three of the last 17 years. But now that we have endured the first months of this global pandemic and seen just how essential our public schools are, we can surely agree it is the right time to prioritize pre-K-12 public education and ensure Nebraska's public schools have the resources they need to serve all children.

By Daniel Russell

LJS Editorial, 7/23: Police grant offers Lincoln chance for improvement

Lincoln will be getting 11 additional police officers next year now that Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird has accepted a federal grant to fund five of those positions.

Local Black Lives Matter supporters had called for Gaylor Baird to reject the $625,000 grant. But last

week, she said she would accept the federal funds to bolster Lincoln's police force. Another six officers who will be paid for by the salary of the city's former public safety director, a vacant position that will not be filled.

Even with the ongoing concerns over policing in Lincoln that hit a flashpoint with the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, accepting the grant, thereby increasing the number of police officers, was simply the right thing to do.

Lincoln has one of the smallest per-capita police departments in the country, and the new officers are needed to parallel the city's continuing growth, both in population and geography. And, importantly, the new officers will allow the city to address growing issues of gun violence -- the point of the grant application.

Once the recruits, who will be hired in January complete police academy and field training requirements, which take more than a year, the new officers will allow the department to dedicate veteran officers to gun crime investigations

That, according to Chief Jeff Bliemeister, will also include reviewing handgun purchase permits to keep guns away from people barred from possessing, preventing illegal gun sales, ramping up ballistic investigations to solve crimes, boosting threat assessment and collaboration with businesses and community groups to increase gun safety education.

But the new officers also must come into a department that is operating with renewed attention to the treatment of minority communities, a process that, for them, starts with intensive implicit violence training.

Reforms, such as the banning of chokeholds, need to be implemented and police accountability -- as envisioned by the Hold Cops Accountable initiative -- needs to be taken seriously and made public

They should also be joining a department that is primarily doing law enforcement work rather than mental health interventions and other similar activities police are now called to do.

To that end, Gaylor Baird is proposing spending $150,000 in the upcoming city budget to pay for crisis support, social services and make more mental health resources available in the city.

That is a good first step forward toward addressing some policing concerns. But more needs to be done -- and Black Lives Matter supporters should continue to press for reforms and police community cooperation.

Similarly, hiring the 11 new officers can also be a positive for Lincoln, if they're providing additional community safety in a reformed, community sensitive department.

LJS Local View: State must plan for changing climate

In April, I published an opinion piece ("A tale of two crises," April 14) that pointed out numerous similarities between the current COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis that is looming today and in the decades ahead.

There, I pointed to the need to plan for future crises, knowing that when confronted with a crisis — a pandemic, a natural disaster or the climate crisis — the costs of inaction (lack of preparedness) are always far greater than the costs of action (preparedness).

While the loss of human life as well as the economic costs and human suffering from COVID-19 continue to mount, we wait anxiously for a vaccine. There is no vaccine for climate change.

Given recent occurrences of extreme weather events locally, nationally and internationally and repeated warnings from scientists, the need for planning and preparedness for the climate crisis has never been more apparent.

There has been a lack of a concerted effort by many political leaders to address these warnings, including those in Nebraska.

I served as one of four authors of a University of Nebraska-Lincoln climate change report in 2014, completed at the request of the Legislature. It examined the science of climate change, identified projected changes in our climate by mid-century and beyond and the implications of these changes on key sectors of Nebraska.

In 2015, I organized a series of eight sector-based roundtables that assembled more than 350 stakeholders from across the state to identify potential adaptation and mitigation measures to address climate change.

Nevertheless, the state's leadership has not addressed the implications of our changing climate. Despite repeated legislative attempts by then-Sen. Ken Haar and more recently by Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks to initiate the development and implementation a climate action plan, no legislative action has occurred.

Nebraska remains poorly prepared for a future characterized by a warmer climate, including more frequent and severe heat waves, droughts, floods and more variable and seasonal changes in precipitation. These extreme events will cause even greater economic, environmental and social impacts than Nebraska experienced in 2012 from a severe drought or the epic flooding in 2019 resulting in more than $3.4 billion dollars in losses.

LB283 is on the agenda for the final days of this year's legislative session. The bill proposes development of a climate action plan for Nebraska, requesting $250,000 from the Petroleum Release Remedial Action Cash Fund. Introduced by Pansing Brooks, LB283 is the priority bill of Sen. John McCollister, and it has the full support of many organizations in the state. A 2020 survey by UNL's Bureau of Sociological Research found that seven in 10 Nebraskans believe climate change is real.

Given the widespread acceptance of the reality of climate change, the next step is to prepare for current and projected changes in climate. Climate change is a threat to Nebraska's economy, the environment, public health and racial justice. The state's agriculturally based economy is especially vulnerable. Proactive actions aimed at addressing that threat now are prudent, socially responsible and more cost effective than inaction that ignores that threat.

While climate change is a complex issue, its implications for Nebraska are real. There exist real solutions to the climate crisis, but we must work together to identify and implement these solutions. A plan developed with broad input from Nebraskans would develop solutions that best fit this state.

An effective climate action plan will enable the state to diminish the negative impacts of climate change while taking advantage of economic and societal opportunities associated with a changing climate. A climate action plan will provide economic sectors and communities with the strategies and tools necessary to take full advantage of the opportunities gained through proactive planning.

An outcome of this planning process will be the identification and adoption of strategies to attract new businesses and investments to Nebraska, leading to the creation of substantial job opportunities to retain and attract the human resources necessary in support of a more vibrant and sustainable economy, one of the goals of Blueprint Nebraska.

We must plan for climate change by taking action now. Passage of LB283 will begin that process and set the state on a course to address proactively our changing climate in a responsible manner. We can and must prepare for this looming crisis.

It is time for the Legislature and the governor to provide leadership on this issue. Their constituents demand that leadership.

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: Spokesman has odd word choice

On July 11, both the Lincoln Journal Star ("Birthday card from Ricketts to Chambers returned to sender") and Omaha World-Herald carried stories about State Sen. Ernie Chambers returning a birthday card received from Gov. Pete Ricketts sent through the State Capitol interoffice mail.
The last paragraph of the story quotes Ricketts' spokesman Taylor Gage, saying, “The birthday cards are a courtesy the governor does for state senators, their wives and fellow governors.” I was one of those wives in 2004, and we were referred to as spouses since the members of the Nebraska Legislature are both men and women. I find it revealing that the governor’s spokesperson’s response would imply state senators are only men.
June Pederson, Lincoln

Scottsbluff SH LETTER TO THE EDITOR: Reader questions TestNebraska availability in Panhandle

It’s been a long time since TestNebraska offered drive thru testing for COVID-19 in Scottsbluff.
Many of us living near Scottsbluff are not able to drive to other distance sites.
With cases on the rise, why aren’t we being given the opportunity anymore to be tested locally by TestNebraska?
J.C. Gable
Scottsbluff
Editor’s Note: TestNebraska is now offering testing at Chadron and Scottsbluff hospitals.
Visit TestNebraska.com to complete an assessment and schedule testing.

OWH: Alisha Shelton's not likely to face Sasse this year, but that won't stop her in 2024

WASHINGTON — Alisha Shelton was 12 years old when her family left Staten Island for Nebraska, and the girl from the big city wasn’t sure what to expect from her new home — she didn’t even know what a cornfield looked like.
Before long, however, she was working on a detasseling crew and marveling at the warmth and community spirit of her neighbors. Those early years in Nebraska helped shape the person she would become.
“It was the basic foundation that has really built my personality and my work ethic,” Shelton said.
Now a 38-year-old Omaha mental health practitioner, Shelton finds herself in one of the weirder Nebraska political campaigns in recent memory. Shelton was among the seven candidates seeking the Democratic Senate nomination, but Omaha baker Chris Janicek won.
Since that May primary, however, the Nebraska Democratic Party has pulled its support of Janicek and pushed him to withdraw over explicit comments he made about a staffer in a group text.
The party’s state central committee voted earlier this week to replace Janicek with Shelton — but that will only happen if he agrees to step aside before a Sept. 1 deadline.
And Janicek has insisted he’s not going anywhere.
“Everyone should hear this and hear this now. I will be on the ballot come November 3rd,” Janicek said in a press release this week. “If you won’t or can’t forgive me, then don’t vote for me.”
He brought up suggestions that he doesn’t stand a chance against incumbent Republican Sen. Ben Sasse and noted that Democrats haven’t won a House or Senate race in a while.
“I am here working for a chance to serve the people of Nebraska and I will not give up,” Janicek said. “If you would rather vote the way (party chair) Jane Kleeb tells you to, then that is your choice. I for one, say it’s time for change. I want to help with that change. THAT’S why I will continue to run for United States Senate.”

If Janicek does not step aside by Sept. 1, party officials expect to instead push a write-in candidate but have not indicated who that would be.
Shelton is barred from running as a write-in candidate because she lost in the primary. That means her campaign is now in an odd position of pushing forward in the hopes that Janicek steps aside but also knowing it all could evaporate in a few weeks if he does not.
In an interview, Shelton said Janicek's refusal to withdraw is a distraction from important issues such as the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak — a pandemic she says requires a united, bipartisan response.
"We need elected officials and legislators that are working to help represent us and make our lives easier and make it more attainable to achieve the American dream," Shelton said.
Shelton said she wants to run against Sasse in part because of their differences on health care policy — his 2014 campaign was rooted in his opposition to the Affordable Care Act.
Shelton is past president of the Omaha alumnae chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. Kaylene Page served as the group's secretary with her and recalled how Shelton researched the way other chapters conducted their business to improve the local organization. That included restructuring the executive board, Page said.
She also recalled how Shelton brought into the conversation people who had something to contribute but were tentative to speak up.
"Alisha is really good at being able to notice those people," Page said. "It's probably the therapist in her."
Shelton knows her 2020 Senate campaign could come to an abrupt end Sept. 1, but she's also looking down the road.
"If Chris Janicek does not step down, I will be running for 2024 against Deb Fischer," Shelton said.
By Joseph Morton

AP: Nebraska Senate hopeful who sent vulgar texts declines exit

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A Democratic U.S. Senate candidate in Nebraska doubled down Wednesday on his promise to stay in the race, despite growing pressure to drop out after he sent sexually vulgar text messages to a campaign staffer.
Chris Janicek said in a statement that he won't withdraw from the race, and he blamed the state's top Democratic leaders for the party's recent struggles to win statewide office in Republican-dominated Nebraska. His comments came just days after the Nebraska Democratic Party endorsed one of Janicek's former primary opponents, Alisha Shelton, to try to unseat Republican U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse.
The endorsement won't necessarily stop Janicek, however, because he already won the Democratic nomination in May. State law doesn't allow party officials to remove him from the ballot without his consent.
"I am a proud Democrat," Janicek said in a Facebook posting and email sent to local news outlets. "Now is the time for you to realize that I am not going away."
Janicek has faced widespread criticism and pressure to withdraw ever since a campaign worker revealed the offensive text message to party officials and hired a lawyer.
The messages show that, after he won the nomination, Janicek wrote in a group text to campaign workers that he had gotten into an argument with the female staffer. He then asked whether the campaign should spend money on "getting her laid," and made crude references to group sex. The woman who was the target of his remarks was accidentally included on the text.
Janicek later admitted to sending the texts and said he repeatedly apologized to the woman. He has argued that, because he's openly gay, his comments shouldn't count as sexual harassment.
Nebraska Democratic Party Chairwoman Jane Kleeb has repeatedly called on Janicek bow out of the race and said the party won't offer any of its resources to his campaign. Even before the scandal, Janicek, who

owns an Omaha cupcake bakery, wasn't likely to win because of the state's GOP leanings.
Janicek criticized Kleeb's management of the party, noting that the number of self-identified Democrats in Nebraska has slipped to a record-low 29% of registered voters. He said the party is "drowning in debt" and hasn't won a governor's race since Ben Nelson, who left office in 1999.
"When the party says they offer resources, I'd like to know what they are because our campaign hasn't seen any," he said in the statement.
A Nebraska Democratic Party spokesman declined to respond to Janicek's criticism, saying Kleeb stands by her original statement calling for him to withdraw.
Janicek's posting on Facebook drew a barrage of negative comments and calls for him to drop out of the race so that Shelton can become the nominee.
By Grant Schulte

AP: Outbreak at Iowa pork plant was larger than state reported

IOWA CITY — The first confirmed coronavirus outbreak at an Iowa meatpacking plant was far more severe than previously known, with more than twice as many workers becoming infected than the State Department of Public Health told the public, newly released records show.
The department announced at a May 5 press conference that 221 employees at the Tyson Foods pork processing plant in Columbus Junction had tested positive for COVID-19.
But days earlier, Tyson officials told Iowa workplace safety regulators during an inspection that 522 plant employees had been infected to their knowledge, documents obtained through the open records law show.
A dozen of the plant's roughly 1,300 workers were believed to have been hospitalized by then, and two died after contracting the virus, Tyson officials told the Iowa Occupational Safety and Health Administration.
The discrepancy adds to mounting questions that the state health department faces about its handling of public information during the pandemic. The department last week forced out its longtime spokeswoman.
The agency has also faced criticism for seeking to charge thousands of dollars for open records requests and for not routinely announcing outbreaks in workplaces, among other things. The department said it has "gone above and beyond to provide up-to-date and comprehensive information" to the public.
Department spokeswoman Amy McCoy said the 221 case figure reflected the results of the department's testing and what it "could verify from our data systems" at the time.
Tyson spokesman Gary Mickelson said the number of infections announced by the state appeared to reflect only the first round of testing at the plant and that additional testing had uncovered hundreds of more cases.
But it's unclear why the department would not have the full testing results that Tyson described to Iowa OSHA. The department, along with county health officials, had conducted the mass testing of workers weeks earlier.
Iowa OSHA opened an inquiry after seeing media reports that two workers had died from the virus and inspected the plant on April 30.
"There were 522 positive COVID-19 cases to the best of the company's knowledge," the investigation report says.

AP: GOP struggles to finalize virus relief as jobless benefit is about to expire

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republicans and the White House reached tentative agreement for more

testing funds in the next COVID-19 relief package, but deep disagreements over the scope of the $1 trillion in federal aid remain ahead of Thursday's expected rollout.
Facing a GOP revolt, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was preparing to roll out a "handful" of COVID-19 aid bills instead of a single package, according to a top lawmaker involved in the negotiations.
A key holdup remains President Donald Trump's push for a payroll tax cut, according to a Republican granted anonymity to discuss the private talks. Hardly any GOP senators support the idea. Instead, McConnell and some Republicans prefer another round of direct $1,200 cash payments to Americans.
Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the negotiators have agreed to an amount on direct payments, but declined to share details.
The rest of the legislation is taking shape even as key Senate Republicans are rejecting the overall rescue, which is almost certain to grow. There will be no new money for cash-strapped states and cities, which are clamoring for funds, but theywill be provided with additional flexibility to tap existing aid funds.
Republicans propose giving$105billion tohelp schools reopen and $15 billion for child care centers to create safe environments for youngsters during the pandemic.
The centerpiece of the GOP effort remains McConnell's liability shield to protect businesses, schools and others from lawsuits related to COVID-19.
Still unresolved is how to phase out the $600 weekly unemployment benefit boost that is expiring, starting Friday. Republicans appear to be settling on a $200 benefit that would ultimately be adjusted according to state jobless benefits rates.
The breakthrough on testing money, though, was key after days of debate between Republicans and the White House, showing a potential shift in the administration's thinking about the importance of tracking the spread of the virus. Republicans wanted $25 billion but the Trump administration said the $9 billion in unspent funds from a previous aid deal was sufficient. The two sides settled on adding $16 billion to the unspent funds to reach $25 billion, senators said.
Despite deep differences among Republicans, McConnell is trying to push forward with what he calls a "starting point" in negotiations with Democrats.
Exasperated Democrats warned the GOP infighting with Trump is delaying needed relief to Americans during the crisis, with the U.S. pandemic death toll climbing past 142,000.
With millions out of work and a potential wave of evictions ahead, the severity of the prolonged virus outbreak is testing Washington's ability to respond. Schools are delaying fall openings, states are clamping down with new stay-home orders and the fallout is rippling through an economy teetering with high unemployment and business uncertainty. A new AP-NORC poll shows very few Americans want full school sessions without restrictions in the fall.
Democrats, who already approved House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's more sweeping $3 trillion package two months ago, said time is running out for Trump and his GOP allies to act.
As Trump and his GOP allies are tangled over details, a stopgap measure may be needed to prevent the unemployment benefits from being shutoff.
"We cannot allow there to be a cliff in unemployment insurance given we're still at about 11% unemployment," said Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio.
Mnuchin and Meadows made it clear during a private meeting Tuesday with Pelosi and Schumer that the White House was resisting Democratic proposals for new spending on virus testing, housing aid or money for cash-strapped states, according to a person granted anonymity to discuss the private talks.
Congress approved a massive $2.2 trillion aid package in March, the biggest of its kind in U.S. history.

AP: More states make wearing masks mandatory

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Ohio, Indiana and Minnesota are the latest states to require residents

statewide to wear masks due to the pandemic.
Gov. Tim Walz signed an executive order Wednesday requiring Minnesotans to wear a face covering in indoor businesses and indoor public settings. The order takes effect Saturday.
Indiana will have a statewide face mask mandate starting Monday, Gov. Eric Holcomb said Wednesday. The order will apply to anyone 8 and older in any indoor public or business areas and at outdoor public spaces when sufficient distancing can't be maintained.
Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine announced the state's mask requirement will be expanded statewide. It goes into effect Thursday evening for people 10 and older. He had resisted making the order statewide but said more counties are seeing increasing numbers.
FAUCI TO TESTIFY
Dr. Anthony Fauci and two other top public health officials will testify next week to aHouse subcommittee that's been investigating the federal response to a coronavirus pandemic still inflicting a toll on Americans, officials with the panel said Wednesday.
Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has become the government's most visible face in the battle against the virus, and polls show him as its most trusted authority as well. That's in sharp contrast to President Donald Trump, who gets low marks from the public after ceding much of the U.S. response to the nation's governors, resulting in an inconsistent hodgepodge of restrictions and a resurgence of the disease in many states.
The July 31 hearing will focus on "the urgent need for a national comprehensive plan" to address the virus, committee officials said in a statement announcing the session.
CALIFORNIA CASES
On a day when California became the state with the most coronavirus infections in the U.S., Gov. Gavin Newsom said Wednesday that officials are redoubling efforts to secure protective gear and are preparing to expand the number of available hospital beds to handle a surge in patients.
With more than 409,000 cumulative COVID-19 cases in the state, California on Wednesday exceeded the number reported in New York by about 700 cases, according to data provided by Johns Hopkins University.
After leading the nation in the number of coronavirus cases, New York has since experienced a decline in infections, deaths and hospitalizations while numbers have climbed in California.
"We are a state the size of 21 states combined, so its not surprising now that as we have begun reopening key sectors of our economy and people continue to mix … that our numbers would start to go up, in total the highest in the nation," Newsom said, calling it "a sober reminder of why we are taking things as seriously as we are."
On Wednesday, Newsom said that 12,807 people tested positive the day before, "the highest reported number in our state," and that 115 Californians infected died in the last 24 hours.
SENIOR CARE
Fearing another grim wave of nursing home deaths as COVID-19 cases rebound, Trump announced Wednesday his administration will provide $5 billion to help facilities counter the virus.
The move follows Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's recent unveiling of a family caregiver plan that aims to greatly expand and subsidize alternatives to institutional care for frail older adults. Both men are competing for seniors' votes against a backdrop of eroding political support for Trump among older Americans.
"I want to send a message of support and hope to every senior citizen," Trump said at the White House. "The light is starting to shine and wewill get there very quickly."

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