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Cc:	Anthony Goins
Subject:	Tenants struggle to pay rent because of the pandemic
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'We don't have the money for it': Tenants struggle to pay rent because of pandemic

OMAHA, Neb. —
Property owners and tenants across the metro said they were nervous for the first day of April -- the day rent is due.

Megan Archer and her family recently moved to Bellevue in February.

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"I really hope we can stay here. Rent is due and we do not have the money for it," she said.

Her employer closed for now because of COVID-19, so she's not making any money.

"We're kind of just hoping for the best and just going with the flow," Archer said.

Jeremy Aspen, president of Wistar Group in Omaha, said property owners need to be "flexible and helpful."

"People are going through some tough times, rents are still due, but we can help out and make sure it's not as pressing or as much of a burden right now," he said.

Aspen said every case is different, but he said some investors in his group are offering rent deferrals or are not charging rent right now. Others are pulling it from security deposits. The property management company is even offering gift cards to some tenants who need money for groceries.

"If somebody does not need something and it makes sense, generally speaking people step up to the plate and help out," he said.

In downtown Ralston, business owner Ashley Cap said her landlord is letting them pay later and is helping them find access to loans.

"As soon as we contacted him he without a doubt said, 'Don't worry about it, we'll take care of you,'" she said.

She said her pet salon has never closed for this long in 13 years.

"You know, the bills do pile up when you're not working. There is no back-up income. It's something my whole family does, right now it's just day-by-day like the rest of everybody," Cap said.

Cap added the helping hand lets her focus on other things.

"When we're all said and done we'll be here to get everything back on track to making everybody look pretty," she said.

In a press conference Wednesday afternoon, Governor Pete Ricketts said he's encouraging landlords to talk to their banks about flexibility and to be mindful of renters impacted by the virus.

Ricketts already signed an executive order on evictions. That order puts eviction hearings on hold until the end of May.

Nebraska's Apartment Association is urging owners to suspend evictions for 90 days.

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Cc: Pinkerman, Justin <Justin.Pinkerman@nebraska.gov>
Subject: Governor's Office Daily Update - 4-2-20

Ag Valley Co-op
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Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Apr 2020	2.98	-37.00	08:39
Corn	Dec 2020	3.08	-40.00	08:39
Milo	Apr 2020	2.50	-85.00	08:39
Milo	Dec 2020	2.63	-85.00	08:39
Soybeans	Apr 2020	7.66	-95.00	08:39
Soybeans	Dec 2020	7.63	-100.00	08:39
Wheat	Apr 2020	3.95	-70.00	08:39
Wheat	Jul 2020	4.07	-65.00	08:39

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AP: US unemployment claims hit record 6.6 million as layoffs accelerate with virus

LJS: Ricketts' biggest worry is not to overwhelm health care system

As we enter April, which may be the month of maximum danger for Nebraska in its battle against the coronavirus, Gov. Pete Ricketts says his greatest worry or concern is to "make sure we do not overwhelm the health care system."

That's why much of what he has done to prepare for the spread of the virus in the state, an expectation that is turning into reality now, has been aimed at measures to beef up hospitals, increase the number of available health care providers and beds, accelerate the supply of ventilators and personal protective equipment that may be needed to fight this battle, and increase testing capacity.

"It's 110% of my day," the governor said in answering a question during his daily coronavirus news briefing.

"It's all that me and my team are focused on now."

Wednesday night, Ricketts made another dramatic move, ordering schools statewide to remain closed to students through May 31. Extracurricular activities are canceled statewide.

The directed health measure essentially ends the prospect of students returning to classrooms this school year. Colleges and universities and K-12 districts will have to finish out the semester via remote learning.

In making decisions, Ricketts said he talks to medical experts at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, whom he has relied upon from the beginning of this challenge, every day.

"We've got to do better at social distancing for the entire month of April, at least," the governor said.

"Physical distancing. It is working. It is having an impact."

Once again, Ricketts said he does not plan to issue a statewide stay-at-home order similar to those in effect in at least 37 states.

However, Nebraska counties included in state-issued directed health measures restricting gatherings of no more than 10 people and closing certain businesses grew to 56 on Wednesday evening with the first untraceable case of coronavirus reported in west-central Nebraska's Lincoln County.

As of 6 p.m., the state reported 214 confirmed cases, with Wednesday marking the most new cases thus far in Nebraska.

A growing number of those cases are centered in group living facilities, with 19 cases linked to the Carter Place assisted-living facility in Blair and 11 at the Douglas County Health Center for long-term care residents.

The Three Rivers Public Health Department on Wednesday said residents of the Carter House, which was temporarily closed, were moved to a floor of CHI Midlands in Papillion reopened as a quarantine unit.

The state's fifth death from COVID-19 was reported Wednesday to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. The woman was a Madison County resident in her 70s with underlying conditions.

To further control spread of the virus, Ricketts said if a person comes into Nebraska from another state to use its recreational facilities or may be returning from wintering in a warmer state, he or she is being directed to self-quarantine for 14 days.

That directive will be posted on highway signs, Ricketts said.

Truckers will be exempted.

Dr. Gary Anthone, the state's chief medical officer, said preparations for spread of the virus include action now to identify dormitory space at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Nebraska at Kearney, along with hotel space in Lincoln and Omaha, that may be available if needed for "overload and transfer" of coronavirus patients that do not need to be hospitalized.

Those might be recovering patients or others who "just need quarantine or isolation," he said.

Kathy Siefken, executive director of the Nebraska Grocery Industry Association, joined the governor at his briefing and urged Nebraskans to go grocery shopping just once a week and shop alone.

"Do not stockpile," she said. "There is plenty of food."
The real challenge, she said, is social distancing.
"Our customers need to take this issue very seriously," Siefken said.
"If the parking lot is full, go home," she said, and come back again.
Toilet paper is returning to the stores, Siefken said, following an unexpected buyout that emptied the shelves.
State Banking Director Mark Quandahl told the briefing that an executive order by the governor will allow for documents to be notarized without the need for in-person contact.
By Don Walton

OWH: Nebraska is 'months' away from having widespread coronavirus testing available, Ricketts says

LINCOLN — It's crunch time when it comes to complying with the state's social distancing guidelines, Gov. Pete Ricketts said Wednesday, again urging Nebraskans to maintain 6-foot distances and avoid gatherings of more than 10 people to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.
"Right now is the time. We need everyone to participate," Ricketts said. "Folks, by and large, are complying with it, but we've got to do better."
The state now has 56 of its 93 counties under directed health measures. They include requirements, enforceable by law, that sit-down areas of bars and restaurants close and convert to takeout and delivery only, and that public gatherings be limited to 10 or fewer people.
More than 83% of the state's population is under such limits.
On Wednesday, as the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases climbed past 200, 15 more counties were added to the list of counties under directed health measures, and residents in the rest of the state were urged to follow the restrictions voluntarily.
Ricketts acknowledged that the state is "months" away from having the kind of widespread testing available to conduct a random test of Nebraskans to determine the precise extent of the coronavirus epidemic.
The state is doing about 350 tests a day now, according to Nebraska Chief Medical Officer Dr. Gary Anthone, and has the capability of doing 700 to 800 a day. But there's a shortage of reagents, the chemicals needed to process the tests, he said, and tests cannot be expanded until that is resolved.
"No governor in the country feels like they have the testing they need," said Ricketts, who participated in a conference call through the National Governors Association on Wednesday.
The governor, during his daily briefing at the State Capitol on the coronavirus outbreak, said he is not at this point considering a statewide "stay-at-home" order, as has been mandated in several states. Nor, Ricketts said, does he want to issue harsher guidance for big-box stores, whose crowded aisles over the weekend brought criticism from Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert, among others.
People and businesses, the governor said, just need to use "common sense" by washing hands frequently, staying home if you are sick, shopping only when necessary and maintaining proper distances when out.
"We don't need to bring down a big, heavy hand," Ricketts said, though he added that the state "can take further steps."
He said that the slow rise in coronavirus cases in Nebraska appears to show that precautionary measures to date are slowing the spread of the virus. He said case numbers are not multiplying as fast as they might be.
Ricketts also said Nebraskans need to do better at following social distancing guidelines, including limiting the size of groups, maintaining a 6-foot distance between people and staying home if sick.
But he said signs indicate that the efforts made to date are slowing the spread of the virus.
The number of coronavirus cases in Nebraska is expected to peak in mid-April through mid-May, so the governor said that steps taken now to limit contact with other people can make a big difference.
"We can all be a part of slowing the spread," Ricketts said.
As of Wednesday, Nebraska had five deaths and 214 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. But a new study predicts that 442 Nebraskans could die from the virus before the first wave ends in late June.
That would make COVID-19 one of the top 10 causes of death in the state. For 2017, the latest year available, 393 people died of pneumonia or influenza in the state.
Other things discussed during the governor's briefing:

- Manufacturers of shortage items, like toilet paper and sanitizer, are ramping up, and empty shelves should be filling soon, according to Kathy Siefken of the Nebraska Grocery Industry Association. But more "mega" rolls of toilet paper may been seen because it's more efficient to make those jumbo-size rolls, Siefken said.
- Siefken repeated the recommended steps for shopping in grocery stores, which include not bringing reusable bags (they can't be guaranteed to be virus-free), shopping by yourself and trying to shop only once a week, rather than daily. "As individuals, we need to limit the contact with other people," she said.
- The state has lined up dormitories at University of Nebraska campuses in Omaha, Lincoln and Kearney for possible use if coronavirus cases outstrip hospital capacity. Rooms in now-closed hotels might also be used, Dr. Anthone said. The extra space would be used for those who need to isolate or who are already recovering, he added.
- Residents of a Blair nursing home that was closed due to several cases of coronavirus were transferred to extra hospital space that had been freed up in Midlands Hospital in Papillion and St. Elizabeth Regional Medical Center in Lincoln. Staff there were prepared and excited to help, Dr. Anthone said.
- 90% of the people who have tested positive for coronavirus in Nebraska are self-isolating at home, he said.
- A new state law allowing online notarizing of documents will go into effect immediately, rather than the scheduled July 1 start date, because of an executive order signed by the governor. That will help the banking and real estate industries, according to State Banking Director Mark Quandahl.

By Paul Hammel and Martha Stoddard

AP: Ricketts: Nebraskans must 'do better' to slow coronavirus

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Gov. Pete Ricketts issued a stern warning Wednesday to try to pressure Nebraskans into taking steps to keep the coronavirus from spreading, but he reiterated that he won't impose a stay-at-home order as at least 31 other states have done.

His comments came as the number of confirmed Nebraska cases rose to 210 as of Wednesday afternoon, with four people dead. New cases have continued to surface daily, with 33 confirmed Wednesday afternoon, up from 25 the previous day and 17 on Monday.

Ricketts said it appears that statewide social distancing rules are successfully preventing even larger increases, but "we have to do more" to avoid overloading the state's hospitals.

"Folks, we've got to do better," he said at a Capitol news conference. "I have by and large seen that Nebraskans are paying attention to this, but we've got to do better."

Ricketts has repeatedly said he won't issue a stay-at-home order, as at least 31 other states and the District of Columbia have done.

Earlier Wednesday, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issued a stay-at-home order that will remain in effect for at least 30 days amid growing pressure from local and federal authorities. The Florida order includes exceptions for buying food, medicine and gas, visiting the doctor, outdoor exercise and commuting to jobs deemed essential. All businesses not considered essential must close their offices and stores, but can let employees work from home.

Nebraska has taken a less restrictive, regional approach. Statewide, officials have urged residents not to have any social gathering larger than 10 people, but that request isn't legally enforceable.

However, Ricketts has also ordered more restrictive "directed health measures" in 52 of Nebraska's 93 counties. The directed health measures impose the same 10-person limit, but people who refuse to comply can be charged with a misdemeanor. The orders also require restaurants and bars in those areas to close their dining areas, but they can still offer takeout and delivery.

Asked Tuesday why Nebraska hasn't announced a full stay-at-home order, Ricketts said he was following a tailored approach out of concern that imposing such an order too early might lead some residents to grow weary and stop following them, which would then allow the outbreak to worsen. He said more immediate action was needed in places like Omaha and Lincoln because the number of local cases are likely to surge first, but rural areas may not have the same problem.

A top lobbyist for Nebraska grocery stores said customers "need to take this issue very, very seriously," so that state officials aren't forced to impose even tougher restrictions.

"Do what needs to be done so other people don't need to make those decisions for you," said Kathy Siefken, executive director of the Nebraska Grocery Industry Association.

Siefken, who appeared with Ricketts at the news conference, said grocery stores are taking steps to keep the virus from spreading, but some Nebraska stores have seen large crowds as people try to stock up on supplies.

Meanwhile, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services announced Tuesday that a Buffalo County man in his 90s had become the state's fourth resident to die of COVID-10.

For most people, COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. Older adults and people with existing health problems are among those particularly susceptible to more severe illness, including pneumonia.
By Grant Schulte

LJS: Gov. Ricketts moves to close schools to students through May 31

Students in Nebraska will not be returning to the classroom this spring.
In extending social distancing restrictions to more counties Wednesday evening, Gov. Pete Ricketts directed that schools statewide remain closed to students through May 31.
Most districts end their school years in May, including Lincoln Public Schools. Students will complete the semester taking classes through online instruction.
Extracurricular activities are canceled statewide, under the latest directed health measure.
By Todd Henrichs

AP: Governor orders Nebraska schools to remain closed to kids

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The governor has ordered Nebraska schools to remain closed to students through May 31 as officials reported that the state's COVID-19 death toll has risen to five.
Students have been taking their lessons at home via online classes since schools began closing last month as the coronavirus pandemic spread through Nebraska. Gov. Pete Ricketts' order, issued Wednesday, ensures the children won't be returning this school year to the close quarters of their classrooms.
The governor also canceled school extracurricular activities but said the closures don't apply to staff members working in school buildings.
The Nebraska Health and Human Services Department reported Wednesday night that the latest COVID-19 death was a Madison County woman in her 70s who had underlying health conditions.
The state's total number of confirmed cases has risen to 214, the department said. Nearly 3,600 people have tested negative.
For most people, COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. Older adults and people with existing health problems are among those particularly susceptible to more severe illness, including pneumonia.
Earlier Wednesday, Ricketts warned Nebraskans that they must help keep COVID-19 from spreading, but he reiterated that he won't impose a stay-at-home order as many other states have done.
It appears social distancing rules are preventing even larger case increases, Ricketts said, but "we have to do more" to avoid overloading the state's hospitals.
Statewide, officials have urged residents not to have any social gathering larger than 10 people, but that request isn't legally enforceable.
However, Ricketts has ordered more restrictive "directed health measures" to dozens of Nebraska's 93 counties, including 15 more he added Wednesday. The directed health measures impose the same 10-person limit, but people who refuse to comply can be charged with misdemeanors. The orders also require restaurants and bars in those areas to close their dining areas, but they can still offer takeout and delivery.

OWH: Ricketts: Most students will not return to classes this school year

Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts on Wednesday night made it official: Most students will not return to classes this spring.
In a directed health measure issued late Wednesday, Ricketts directed schools statewide to operate without students in their buildings through May 31. For most districts, including in Omaha and Lincoln, the academic year ends in May.
Students have been learning from home via remote classes.
Extracurricular activities are also canceled statewide.
The restriction does not apply to school staff, who are allowed to report to work in buildings.

By Nancy Gaarder

OWH: Gov. Ricketts' announcement effectively ends spring sports in Nebraska high schools

LINCOLN — Gov. Pete Ricketts announced Wednesday night that extracurricular activities have been canceled statewide through May 31 because of the coronavirus pandemic, meaning there will not be a spring sports season in Nebraska high schools.

In the governor's directive released at 8:45 p.m., Nebraska schools are to operate without students in their buildings through May 31.

Last week, the Nebraska School Activities Association announced that its activities were suspended through May 1, in part because many schools were announcing that their buildings would be closed until the end of April.

NSAA Executive Director Jay Bellar could not be reached late Wednesday night for comment.

The coronavirus first affected NSAA activities with the boys basketball state tournament. On March 11, hours after officials announced that a male Crofton High School student who had attended the girls state tournament games March 5 had tested positive for COVID-19, the NSAA accepted the recommendation of the Lincoln/Lancaster County Health Department to restrict attendance at boys tournament games to immediate family members.

Nebraska was one of the last four states to have high school competition. The boys tournament finished on schedule March 14.

On March 16, the NSAA suspended practices until March 30 and competition until April 2. That was superseded March 25 by the closures through May 1.

The NSAA's spring postseason was to begin May 2 with soccer districts. State soccer has May 13 through 19 dates in Omaha, state baseball May 16 through 21 in Lincoln and Papillion, state girls tennis May 21 and 22 in Omaha and Lincoln, state track and field May 22 and 23 at Burke Stadium and state boys golf May 27 and 28 at four sites across the state.

When he made the March 25 announcement, Bellar said the NSAA was continuing to follow federal and state directives.

"If things happen on the positive side faster than we expect, we can make adjustments that way," he said. "If the closings go past May 1, there's not a lot we can do at that point in time."

By Stu Pospisil

NCN: Governor Ricketts give thoughts on panhandle school closure

SIDNEY, NE - Several students in the Nebraska Panhandle will not get to walk in a traditional graduation this May. The Panhandle Public Health District announced Tuesday afternoon along with ESU 13 that all schools in the region would close for the remainder of the school year.

Also as part of the announcement, PPHD said traditional graduation ceremonies in May will not be possible.

Norfolk Public Schools in northeast Nebraska had previously announced a closure for the rest of the year in late-March, but this is the first sweeping move in which all schools in an E-S-U region are closing.

Wednesday morning on KSID, Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts gave his thoughts on the closure.

"Certainly it's going to create a burden for those seniors especially who are not going to have they high school graduation that they thought they would," Ricketts said. "This is part of what is going to make them a generation of people who have gone through tough times and know what it is like to go through that, and they'll come out stronger on the other end."

Ricketts went on to offer these words of encouragement to the state as the world faces a global pandemic.

"100 years ago when we went through World War I and a pandemic, this country emerged as the greatest nation on the face of the Earth, and I have no doubt that we will come out on the other side of this pandemic as the greatest nation on the face of the Earth."

Ricketts issued a directed health measure for the entire Panhandle Monday night. It is in effect until May 11th.

By Elic Chisam

Kearney Hub: Buffalo County man dies of COVID-19; Gov. Ricketts enacts Directed Health Measure in area

HOLDREGE — Buffalo County recorded its first COVID-19 death Tuesday.
The patient, a man in his 90s, had been hospitalized since late last week. It is the fourth COVID-19 death in the state.
"We send our condolences to the family of this individual," said Jeremy Eschliman, the health director at Two Rivers Public Health Department.
Several hours earlier, a new case of COVID-19 was announced in Buffalo County, prompting Gov. Pete Ricketts to enact a Directed Health Measure in the Two Rivers area. It includes Buffalo, Dawson, Franklin, Gosper, Harlan, Kearney and Phelps counties.
The DHM went into effect at 10 p.m. Tuesday and remains in effect until May 11.
The new case was acquired by community transmission, Eschliman said. That is when a person has COVID-19, but public health officials are unable to identify how or where that person became infected. No further information was provided.
This newest case is the ninth in the Two Rivers area since March 20. Seven of those are in Buffalo County, including the man who died Tuesday. There is also one case in Dawson County and one in Kearney County. Patients range in age from their 30s to 90s. At least five of those cases are travel-related.
This is the sixth Directed Health Measure enacted in certain regions of Nebraska. A seventh DHM took effect Tuesday night as well in Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties.
Directed Health Measures impose enforceable limits on public gatherings. They apply to places such as, but not limited to, theaters, churches, houses of worship, gyms, social clubs, salons and social gatherings, including weddings, funerals, concerts and athletic events. These places are not required to close, but must continue to practice social distancing.
Restaurants and bars are required to close dining areas immediately and move to take out service, delivery, and/or curbside services only, until further notice. Restaurants will play a key part in feeding people throughout the pandemic, Ricketts' statement said.
Schools are directed to operate without students in the buildings, but school staff may continue working in the building.
These measures do not apply to day care centers, which can stay open, with limitations, including no more than 10 children per classroom.
The Directed Health Measure does not apply to places such as office buildings, grocery stores, pharmacies, hospitals, nursing homes, correctional facilities, courthouses, courtrooms, banks, car dealerships, auto repair shops, nursing homes, long-term care facilities, small shops, golf courses, big box stores, gas stations, convenience stores, shopping malls, manufacturing facilities, packing facilities, construction jobs and other traditional office settings.
Weddings and funerals also are subject to the 10-person limit. Event planners and facilities are encouraged to be flexible with people who are rearranging their plans, Two Rivers said.
Eschliman added, "As our community holds this (grieving) family in our thoughts, we urge everyone to continue to practice social distancing. We knew there would be deaths from COVID-19 in Nebraska, and this underscores the potential seriousness of the disease and the importance of the measures we're taking as individuals and as a state to help slow the spread of the virus."
By Mary Jane Skala

OWH: Madison County woman is state's fifth death; Nebraska's cases total 214

A Norfolk woman is the state's fifth COVID-19 death, health officials reported Wednesday night.
The woman in her 70s had multiple underlying medical conditions, the Elkhorn Logan Valley Health Department said.
Sixteen more people have tested positive for the disease caused by the novel coronavirus in Douglas County.
Several other counties reported new cases Wednesday, including a health care worker at a long-term care facility in Hall County.
Nebraska's total number of cases grew to 214 by 6 p.m. Wednesday, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
Officials have said the actual number is almost certainly higher, owing to the limited availability of testing. By Wednesday, 3,812 people had been tested. That means about 5.5% of tests have come back positive so far.

The latest batch of Douglas County cases involves a variety of ages: four people in their 20s and 30s, three in their 50s, four in their 60s and four older than 70. Another case is under investigation, and the person's age isn't yet available.
Douglas County Health Director Adi Pour said people must remain home whenever possible as the county's caseload rose to 106 Wednesday night. Of those people, 17 have required hospitalization at some point.
"Social distancing is your best defense against COVID-19," she said in a press release. "This is the proven public health method to stop the spread of this contagious disease."
Sarpy, Platte, Hall, Lancaster, Saunders, Dodge, Madison and Buffalo Counties reported additional cases, including the first case of community spread in Buffalo County and the first case in Cuming County. Community spread means a person was not exposed to the coronavirus through travel or close contact with an person known to be infected.
There were 18 confirmed cases in Sarpy County as of Wednesday.
Officials with the Central District Health Department announced six new Hall County cases, including the health care worker. The department did not name the facility where the person works.
The department "is currently working with the facility to identify possible exposures and to advise as to prevention measures," a press release says.
The Central District Health Department covers Hall, Hamilton and Merrick Counties — the area in and around Grand Island. As of Wednesday evening, 21 people there had tested positive for COVID-19, the coronavirus disease.
That tally includes a Hall County woman in her 60s with underlying health problems who was Nebraska's second coronavirus-related death last week.
Including the Hall County care center, at least six nursing or rehabilitation facilities in Nebraska have residents or health care workers with confirmed cases of coronavirus.
The others are Carter Place in Blair, where 19 workers and residents have tested positive; Papillion Manor in Papillion; the Douglas County Health Center in Omaha; Madonna Rehabilitation Hospitals' Omaha campus; and St. Joseph's Rehabilitation and Care Center in Norfolk.
Gov. Pete Ricketts on Tuesday issued new guidance for nursing homes, including that all workers wear face masks.
The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported another travel-related case Wednesday, Lancaster County's ninth. It involves a man in his 30s who traveled to Dallas last month.
By Erin Duffy

NP Telegraph: North Platte officials ask citizens to voluntarily comply with governor's 'directed health measure'

North Platte health and public officials said Wednesday night they were trying to absorb the full implications of Gov. Pete Ricketts' "directed health measure" in the wake of the city's first confirmed "community spread" cases of COVID-19 infection.
Law enforcement will prepare to enforce what now has become a legal limit on public gatherings of no more than 10 people in many settings, though not in grocery stores and other sites excluded in the governor's order, Police Chief Daniel Hudson said at a Wednesday night press conference.
But he urgently asked North Platte residents to voluntarily comply when officers find more people than allowed in settings like parks or in restaurants where too many people might be standing in line to pick up a takeout order.
"We are going to ask our public: Please, please heed this directive," Hudson told reporters. "We don't want to come into establishments and start citing people or arresting people."
With less than three hours between Ricketts' order and when it took effect, he said, law enforcement hadn't fully figured out what it can and cannot do to enforce the 10-person limit. They'll be meeting with the city's legal counsel and the Lincoln County Attorney's Office Thursday morning to get more clarification, he said.
Already Wednesday night, however, officers were making rounds of bars and restaurants informing them of the 10 p.m. start time of the governor's order, he said.
Mayor Dwight Livingston also urged residents to continue observing the limits on gatherings and maintaining the minimum 6-foot "social distancing" requirements so as many people in North Platte remain healthy as possible.
"We've got a lot of great people in North Platte that have complied, but we have quite a few who have not," the mayor said.
Hudson asked residents who see groups larger than the 10-person limit to use a special email

address, c19@ci.north-platte.ne.us, instead of calling 911.
"If we start getting hundreds of calls an hour with people saying 'There's kids in the park' or 'There's people here,' it will crash our system," he said.
Ricketts' order affecting the six counties of the West Central District Health Department — Lincoln, Logan, McPherson, Hooker, Thomas and Arthur — went into effect at 10 p.m. CT Wednesday.
It was the eighth such order issued across the state since cases of the novel coronavirus began showing up in Nebraska a month ago, with the confirmation of "community spread" — COVID-19 infections that can't be traced back to a definitive source — serving as the trigger in converting guidelines into legal directives.
Even so, the health orders now in place in North Platte aren't as extensive as the total ban on public gatherings imposed in the city on Oct. 7, 1918, when the Spanish flu pandemic's arrival was confirmed. That order remained in place for six weeks.
North Platte's McKinley Education Center served as the backdrop for the latest press conference, which began with Shannon Vanderheiden, the district health department's executive director, highlighting the details of Ricketts' directive.
She noted that all schools in the six counties, whether public or private, are not allowed to reopen to students or the public before May 31. Though North Platte Public Schools already had canceled the rest of the 2019-20 school year, North Platte Catholic Schools had not yet done so.
Self-quarantine and self-isolation guidelines for people with COVID-19 symptoms and those who live with them are now mandatory, Vanderheiden said. Symptoms include cough, shortness of breath and a temperature of 100.4 degrees or higher.
"Our hope is people will continue to do what most have been doing" in isolating themselves when it's indicated, she said. "We don't want to have to make people do anything."
By Todd Von Kampen

Scottsbluff SH: PPHD officials: A lot of questions being asked about directed health measure

Continued calls for people to follow guidelines to prevent the spread of the coranvirus were the key focus of a call updating the media and other officials on the state of cases in the Panhandle.
As of Wednesday, three cases of COVID-19 have been reported in Scotts Bluff County and one case has been reported in Kimball County. There were no new cases reported.
In neighboring Goshen County, one case had also been reported last week. Heather Saul, of Goshen County Public Health updated the Star-Herald with results from the state epidemiologist who says it has not been determined if that case is community spread or not. No locations of potential exposure connected to that case in Scotts Bluff County or Goshen County have been issued for the public. All close contacts have been alerted.
Paulette Schnell, Scotts Bluff County Health director, outlined that 210 cases and four deaths have been reported in the state. In the Panhandle, 167 people have been tested, with a total of 39 test results still pending as of press time.
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts outlined that people need to be more cognizant of social distancing and other measures put into place to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. With Scotts Bluff County's cases as having been traced back to community spread, Ricketts earlier issued an order that the 11 counties of the Panhandle and Grant County would be under a directed health measure through May 11. That measure resulted in changes at restaurants and bars, as well as limits to gatherings. PPHD officials reiterated that violation of the directed health measure is enforceable and a person can be charged with a misdemeanor.
"We are getting a lot of questions about the directed health measure," Kim Engel, director of Panhandle Public Health District, said.
Some questions this week have included whether or not convenience stores have to close eating areas, if hotels can continue to offer continental breakfast seating and if bowling alleys can continue to serve alcohol and food. All of those establishments also fall under the direct health measure and must move to an option that includes take-out, delivery or curbside pickup. At the hotel, for example, guests would need to take their food to their room, rather than eating it in a designated seating area. Salons and fitness centers can remain open, but social distancing among patrons is required.
One of the stringent requirements is that anyone who lives with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19 or is

experiencing symptoms, such as cough, fever, sore throat and difficulty breath, must also quarantine.
A lot of questions have also been asked throughout the week about people traveling. The guidance continues to be that people who are traveling between states — except commuters for essential businesses — should quarantine for 14 days from the date of the test or the onset of symptoms. Ricketts has indicated he will not stop interstate travel, however, the state has taken action and is no longer granting turkey hunting permits to out-of-state persons. The need to self-quarantine applies to those out-of state persons who have already been granted turkey hunting permits, are camping or otherwise staying in the Panhandle. People who travel to the state for the upcoming holiday are advised that they should self-quarantine for 14 days.
Essential workers continue to be advised that they should follow the policies of their employers if traveling between states. Also, if essential workers have been identified as having been at any of the locations identified in the Scotts Bluff County and Kimball County cases, they are advised to contact their employer for guidance. Members of the general public are advised to self-quarantine.
Jessica Davies, assistant director of PPHD, said people with questions about the directed health measure and how it applies to their business can reach out to PPHD officials for guidance. She said that often times, its best for staff to discuss situations personally with those having questions to try to address specifics about their business or situation.
Resources continue to be a problem, Schnell said during Wednesday's call. There are limits to personal protective equipment (ppe) for health workers. Guidance for those who are sewing masks and other things for health care workers has now been issued by PPHD as some hospitals begin accepting the homemade items. Those facilities needing PPE can reach out to PPHD, which has a taskforce for areas such as health care and public safety, and a form so that the organization can assess the need and provide equipment.
"We are doing our best to meet those needs with the resources that we have," Tabi Prochazka, deputy director at PPHD, said.
Additional information, including guidance for businesses, those in the ag community and others, is available on the PPHD website, pphd.org.
By Maunette Loeks

10/11: Tenants hit by global pandemic scramble to come up with rent checks

OMAHA, Neb. (WOWT) It's a rent day like none seen before, millions of Americans pushed out of work by a global pandemic; many of whom are left scrambling to come up with rent on this April 1.
"I've had to dip into my student loans in order to pay rent this month," said Felice Dominguez, a single mother living in Bellevue, Nebraska.
Two weeks ago Dominguez made a tough decision to leave her job as a cleaner.
"Not easy at all, said Dominguez. "Because I know I have rent and know I have bills to pay, but my son is high at risk with the autoimmune disorders that he has."
Terrified of exposing her immune-compromised son to coronavirus, she made the call
"I sat in the parking lot having a panic attack before the last house that I went to," said Dominguez. "And finally told my boss that I couldn't do it anymore."
Like so many renters struggling to get by amid the pandemic, Domingueaz is worried she will eventually get kicked out
"What am I going to do with my three-year-old and my cat?" she said.
Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts has laid down an executive order calling on landlords not to evict tenants impacted by the outbreak. Exactly how the order will be enforced will likely be decided in the courts, according to Legal Aid of Nebraska.
"If anyone thinks they are at risk of eviction because of a loss of income, they can't afford their rent, they should be consulting an attorney," said Scott Mertz with Legal Aid of Nebraska. "And if they cannot afford one apply with Legal Aid of Nebraska."
As for Dominguez, she's just hoping she can find a way to come up with next month's rent.
"I have no idea," she said. "I have no idea. I'm really scared about that."
Under the Governor's the executive order landlords are not supposed to evict anyone who has lost their job, or wages because of the COVID-19 crisis.
People who are missing work to care for children or other relatives at home are also protected, as well as anyone

who's been exposed to the virus or contracted it.
At this time the Governor's order stands through the end of May.

WJAG: Grocery supply chain in Nebraska continues to be strong

LINCOLN - It's been hard to find toilet paper lately thanks to people buying it in bulk when the coronavirus first hit. Though Kathy Siefken, Executive Director of the Nebraska Grocery Industry Association said during the daily coronavirus press conference at the Capitol Wednesday toilet paper is starting to be put back on the shelves.
Siefken said manufacturers are making one size of toilet paper, not three different sizes.
She also said trucks are continuing to replenish supplies and food to the grocery stores on a regular basis.
"Those small stores in rural Nebraska who get normally on average one truck per week. Will continue to get a minimum of one truck per week. Stores that receive multiple trucks per day will continue to receive multiple trucks per day. The system is working, the pipeline is filling back up. There are a few items where there's been a shortage and you will start to see those items fill the shelves here within the next couple of weeks."
Siefken encouraged people to go shopping by themselves, only shop once a week, and if you feel sick have someone shop for you.
Governor Pete Ricketts issued another executive order, this one for remote online notary.
Also Ricketts said there's a new directive health measure for Antelope, Boyd, Brown, Holt, Keya Paha, Knox, Pierce, and Rock counties.
By Cody Ronnfeldt

AP: Trump resists national shutdown, leaving it up to states

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is resisting calls to issue a national stay-at-home order to stem the spread of the new coronavirus despite his administration's projections that tens of thousands of Americans are likely to be killed by the disease. One by one, though, states are increasingly pushing shutdown orders of their own.
Trump said Wednesday he wants to give governors' "flexibility" on whether a stay-at-home policy is the best option for their constituents but acknowledged that he's looking at limiting air and rail travel between hot spots within the United States. The Republican president remains hesitant to press a unified policy even after the White House released "sobering" new projections on Tuesday that 100,000 to 240,000 Americans will likely succumb to the coronavirus even if current social distancing guidelines are maintained.
Surgeon General Jerome Adams said Wednesday the nation's federalist system leaves much of the authority on how to properly respond to catastrophes to state governors and local officials.
"We trust the governors and the mayors to understand their people and understand whether or not they feel like they can trust the people in their states to make the right decisions," Adams said on ABC's "Good Morning America."
On Wednesday alone, five more states — Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Nevada and Pennsylvania — added or expanded their stay-at-home orders.
But the invocation of federalism in the midst of a crisis that threatens a nationwide body count on par with some of the deadliest American wars suggests that Trump and his advisers are cognizant of the political ramifications of their response. Republican governors in states like Florida, Texas and Nebraska have questioned the necessity of applying strong social distancing rules to rural or exurban areas that haven't reported much evidence of the virus.
The lack of a unified, 50-state response also collides with evidence emerging that coronavirus infections are being spread by people who have no clear symptoms, complicating efforts to gain control of the pandemic. A study conducted by researchers in Singapore and published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Wednesday is the latest to estimate that around 10% of new coronavirus infections may be spread by people who were infected with the virus but not experiencing symptoms.
Even while deferring to governors. the Trump administration has issued guidelines that have urged Americans to work from home if possible, cancel on-site instruction at schools and avoid large gatherings. The resistance to a more robust response comes even as Vice President Mike Pence said White House models for the coronavirus toll show the country on a trajectory akin to hard-hit Italy.
Speaking to CNN, Pence said, "We think Italy may be the most comparable area to the United States at this point."
Italy, which has already recorded more than 13,000 deaths, has issued a nationwide quarantine, shutting down

almost all industrial production and offices and largely prohibiting residents from leaving their homes. The U.S. has recorded more than 5,000 deaths, according to figures compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

The White House's best-case projection for loss of life assumes statewide stay-at-home orders, according to a senior administration official familiar with Trump's thinking. Trump, the official said, is a believer in federalism and that it is up to governors to set restrictions for their states. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal discussions.

More than 285 million people live in the 40 states where governors have declared statewide shelter-in-place orders or have recommended that residents stay home. In other states — places like Iowa and Nebraska, among others — governors have resisted state-level decisions, but some localities have declared residents should stay at home.

According to a poll published Wednesday by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 78% of U.S. adults, including 84% of Democrats and 76% of Republicans, favor requiring Americans to stay in their homes except for essential errands. Americans in states that already had stay-at-home orders in place when the survey began are more likely than those in states that did not to approve of their state's response, 63% to 51%.

Still, Trump — who has conducted long, near-daily briefings on his administration's response to the virus outbreak over the last three weeks — has been reluctant to use his bully pulpit to urge governors to issue orders that would help effectively create a national quarantine.

"There are some states that are different," Trump told reporters Wednesday. "There are some states that don't have much of a problem."

But there are signs that Trump administration officials are pushing behind the scenes for holdout governors to issue statewide quarantines.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis had resisted issuing a statewide order but reversed course and issued one Wednesday as federal and local pressure mounted for him to abandon the county-by-county approach he had implemented. DeSantis, a Republican, told reporters that he decided to issue the order after consulting with Trump and White House advisers.

Rep. Donna Shalala, a Florida Democrat, said earlier Wednesday that Trump should be pressing governors for a unified approach to help stem the spread of the disease, calling his response so far "fragmented, weak and uneven."

"He hasn't made a national plea to say we're all in this together, and he hasn't even talked to the governors about all doing the same thing," Shalala, who was secretary of health and human services under President Bill Clinton, said in an interview.

Authority to order quarantines inside states rests almost entirely with states under provisions in the U.S. Constitution ceding power not explicitly delegated to the federal government to states, courts have ruled consistently for years. While the federal government itself can't order nationwide quarantines or impose quarantines on states, courts have said it has clear power under constitutional clauses regulating commerce to quarantine international travelers or those traveling state to state who might be carriers of deadly diseases.

A few legal scholars have argued that the Constitution's Commerce Clause may vest Trump with powers to impose a multiple state or national lockdown with or without states' approval, though any such move under that minority interpretation would almost certainly be challenged immediately as unconstitutional.

Pence told CNN that leaders and residents of states that haven't been hard hit are already taking action to slow the virus' spread.

In Nebraska, Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts has said he's basing his decisions on the advice he gets from public health experts at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, which has dealt extensively with outbreaks and served as a quarantine space for Ebola patients. In Iowa, Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds has resisted a mandatory shelter-in-place order, saying the data she looks at doesn't yet justify it in her state.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, another Republican, said her voluntary guidance had helped slow the infection rate. "The calls to apply a one-size-fits-all approach is herd mentality, it's not leadership," she said.

Ricketts, a vocal Trump supporter, has repeatedly said he won't impose a stay-at-home order in Nebraska but has ordered restaurants either to close their dining areas or allow no more than 10 people inside at once, depending on their location in the state.

In Texas, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has ordered schools to stay closed through at least May and imposed restrictions that doctors and even his critics say are tantamount to a stay-at-home order for the state. Still, Abbott refused to call it that.

"This is not a stay-at-home strategy. A stay-at-home strategy would mean that you have to stay home," Abbott said.

“This is a standard based upon essential services and essential activities."
By Aamer Madhani, Zeke Miller and Alan Fram

Fox News: Coronavirus deaths top 5,000 in US as more states issue stay-at-home orders

Grim news of coronavirus infections and fatalities continued in the U.S. on Wednesday, with the number of confirmed cases rising above 200,000 and the number of deaths surpassing 5,000.
The fatalities for Wednesday alone topped 1,000 -- a one-day toll more than double that usually recorded for lung cancer and influenza combined, USA Today reported. Some researchers predicted U.S. coronavirus deaths could surpass 2,000 per day by mid-April, exceeding daily deaths attributed to heart disease, the report said.
Amid the climbing numbers, five more states – Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Nevada and Pennsylvania – added or expanded stay-at-home orders, while Michigan proposed a 70-day extension of an emergency declaration that had been set to expire April 7.
“Now is the crunch time for us to lessen the peak, to make the bullseye smaller so we don't overrun our health care system,” Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp said, according to FOX 5 of Atlanta. He added that the next three weeks were critical for Georgia and that residents needed to “hunker down.”
In Missouri, Republican Gov. Mike Parson remained among the dwindling number of governors to resist issuing a stay-at-home order in the absence of a federally mandated policy, the Kansas City Star reported.
“Right now there’s still 95 counties in this state that has less than five cases of coronavirus in it,” Parson said Tuesday, according to the Star. “The majority, 75 of them, has one or two. I have to take all that into consideration as I make decisions on how it affects the economy and how it will affect those areas.”
President Trump has insisted that states should be free to determine for themselves which safety measures to implement, citing disparities in how the states have been affected by the outbreak.
“There are some states that are different,” Trump told reporters Wednesday, according to The Associated Press. “There are some states that don’t have much of a problem.”
Not even second-place New Jersey, with more than 22,000 confirmed cases of the virus, came close to approaching first-place New York, which continued to lead the nation with nearly 84,000 cases. New Jersey also trailed far behind New York in deaths, with 355 compared to more than 2,200.
Nevertheless, all 50 states were grappling with a situation that members of the president’s Coronavirus Task Force confirmed this week would get far worse before it gets better, with the deaths of 100,000 to 240,000 Americans expected in the weeks ahead despite the varying intervention measures.
Still, other governors in states without officially declared stay-at-home orders said they remained convinced such moves were not necessary in their states.
In Nebraska, Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts has said he’s been relying on advice from public health experts at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, which has dealt with previous outbreaks and provided quarantine space for Ebola patients.
But Ricketts has ordered restaurants either to close their dining areas or allow no more than 10 people inside at once, depending on their location in the state, according to the AP.
He also said Wednesday that Nebraska’s schools would remain closed through May 31, the Lincoln Journal Star reported.
In Iowa, Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds also has held off from mandating that residents shelter in place, claiming the data she sees doesn’t justify it.
But Reynolds hinted Wednesday she may extend the closures of businesses and schools in the state on Thursday, the Des Moines Register reported.
South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, another Republican, said the infection rate has slowed in her state with only voluntary safety measures in place, the AP reported.
“South Dakota is not New York City,” Noem told reporters Wednesday, according to the Argus Leader of Sioux Falls. “The calls to apply a one-size-fits-all approach is herd mentality, it’s not leadership.”
Even in a time of crisis, Americans’ personal freedoms were paramount, she added.
“The people themselves are primarily responsible for their safety," Noem said. "They are the ones that are entrusted with expansive freedoms. They're free to exercise their rights to work, to worship, and to play. Or to even stay at home, or to conduct social distancing.”

In Texas, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has imposed restrictions that doctors and even his critics say are equivalent to stay-at-home orders but he refuses to use that description.
“This is not a stay-at-home strategy. A stay-at-home strategy would mean that you have to stay home," Abbott said. “This is a standard based upon essential services and essential activities.”
While the policy debates continued, the rising numbers were undeniable in some of the nation’s emerging hotspots beyond New York and New Jersey.
Louisiana reported more than 6,400 cases of the virus as of Wednesday afternoon, with 273 deaths, according to FOX 8 in New Orleans.
Michigan reported more than 9,300 cases and 337 deaths, according to The Detroit News.
In Illinois, the number of cases reached more than 6,900 with 141 deaths, Chicago’s FOX 32 reported.
The daily U.S. death toll from coronavirus is unlikely to drop back below 100 before June 11, a University of Washington study predicts, according to USA Today.
By Dom Calicchio

OWH: Six more Douglas County Health Center residents test positive for COVID-19, bringing total to 8

Six more residents at a long-term care center in Douglas County tested positive for COVID-19 Wednesday.
With two residents confirmed positive on Sunday, the Douglas County Health Center now has eight long-term residents and three staff members who have tested positive for the coronavirus disease, health officials said.
Five of the residents are hospitalized and in stable condition. Three are isolated at the health center and being monitored by staff. One employee is hospitalized in stable condition, and the other two employees are self-isolating at home.
Erin Nelson, the center’s administrator, said Sunday that officials think an infected employee spread the virus to the first two residents. At some point during routine screening of employees, officials found that the worker had an elevated temperature, and he was sent home to self-isolate.
All employees at the health center are trained and required to wear masks. Their temperatures are also checked before starting a shift, officials said.
“We are doing everything in our power to contain the spread,” Nelson said in a press release Wednesday.
By Jessica Wade

OWH: Will Omaha courthouse become coronavirus cluster? State senator wants building to close

Despite the crisis that is the coronavirus, the last two weeks of March were merely business as unusual at the Douglas County Courthouse.
A handful of regulars gathered in a judge’s back room as a lawyer strummed his guitar in an impromptu folk session, killing time during the downtime. In another courtroom, a defense attorney was urged to go home after he sweated and coughed his way through a conversation. “Can’t,” responded the attorney, a solo practitioner. “Don’t have health insurance.”
And a prosecutor — unaware that he had coronavirus — had close encounters (6 feet or less) with at least 50 courthouse folks over the past two weeks. Fifteen-minute coffee talks with judges and their staff. Twenty-minute hearings with defendants and their attorneys.
After the prosecutor found out Monday he had tested positive for COVID-19, a chunk of the courthouse was forced to clear out. Those 50-plus people — including eight of the county’s 16 district judges, two dozen county attorneys and staff members and a dozen public defenders — are supposed to be home in self-quarantine for the next two weeks. In a place that is used to delayed results, it might be mid-April before courthouse regulars know whether the coronavirus exposure turns into a courthouse cluster.
Now, a state senator is turning up the volume on his calls to temporarily close the courthouse.
State Sen. Justin Wayne, an Omaha attorney who handles a mix of issues from criminal defense to evictions, said he urged city and county officials to do so in a conference call last week. The Omaha-Douglas Public Building Commission runs the courthouse and the City-County Building.
“In no way am I saying shut down the legal system — you can still have hearings by phone or by Zoom (videoconferencing software),” Wayne said. “I am saying, ‘Shut down the Douglas County Courthouse.’ Our physical

presence is just not necessary."
Douglas County Public Defender Tom Riley said his attorneys went from relative calm to "their hair on fire" Monday and Tuesday.
"Really — it is time to stop f@#%&*g around," Riley wrote in an email to city and county officials. "To be honest, everyone should be tested. Period."
Courthouses have been classified under essential services and thus excluded from the 10-person limit enacted in 41 of Nebraska's 93 counties. Still, health officials have grown alarmed, even after Douglas County delayed hearings and trials to try to curb numbers. Douglas County Health Director Adi Pour told a judge this week that she was "appalled at how much foot traffic" the courthouse still has — comparing it to the streams of people venturing into home-improvement and grocery stores.
No one interviewed pointed a finger at the prosecutor who tested positive. An affable, longtime deputy Douglas County attorney, he didn't feel well after a training trip to Kansas unrelated to work, went home and reportedly returned to work only after a doctor cleared him. He worked sporadically over the past two weeks. Friday, he found out that a fellow trainee had a positive test, went to the doctor and was tested. He got the results Monday.
But fingers were pointed in other directions — including at Nebraska Supreme Court Chief Justice Mike Heavican, who, after being informed of the prosecutor's positive test, told a judge Monday he wasn't changing his mind; he was keeping the courts open.
"Ridiculous," said a longtime courthouse bailiff. "It's all on him what happens down here (the rest of the way)."
Heavican didn't return a phone call. State Court Administrator Corey Steel said the chief justice asked him to call instead.
The chief justice's March 12 order — titled "in re: Novel Coronavirus and Covid-19 disease" — noted that "one of the most effective ways to protect against the spread of this disease is to limit exposure." The chief then called on judges and attorneys, to the "extent possible … to screen people who may be exhibiting the symptoms of an infectious respiratory illness."
The positive test of the prosecutor — who didn't have any severe symptoms — proves how impossible that task is, said two Douglas County judges, who spoke on condition that they not be named.
Heavican also specified that the order "may be updated as conditions change." On March 12, Nebraska had 11 confirmed cases. As of Wednesday, it had 214 cases and five deaths. Heavican hasn't amended his order.
Steel noted that local officials, not the state, control whether courthouses remain open. In some counties, citizens and litigants arrive at courthouse doors to find them locked, with a sign posted with a phone number to call to try to gain access. In others, deputies are posted outside the door to screen people to see if they have business that must be done.
Steel said the chief justice has encouraged alternative ways to dispense justice. Several counties, including Douglas, have taken measures restricting access — and have utilized alternatives to in-court appearances, such as conferences by video or telephone.
Steel emphasized that the public needs some access to the courts. The state's high court put it this way: "Even in an emergency, Nebraska courts and court offices strive to remain open. Keeping the courts open is an attempt to ensure that no person is deprived access to the courts, even in the aftermath of an emergency."
Steel estimated that Douglas County has reduced its activity to 15% to 20% of what would normally go on. Hearings and jury trials are being postponed. Douglas County's juvenile court is conducting hearings entirely by telephone or video.
In county and district court, judges can work and hold hearings from home. Now, with half of the district judges in self-quarantine, officials are asking litigants and lawyers to call each judge's bailiff to make arrangements.
Ironically, two coronavirus-prevention efforts led the prosecutor to be all over the courthouse over the past two weeks. First, County Attorney Don Kleine had encouraged prosecutors to work from home — and had just a slimmed-down crew in the office. The prosecutor in question was on that crew — and that led him to handle more cases in more courtrooms than normal.
The other factor: Courtrooms were busy expediting cases to get inmates out of jail to make room for those being arrested. That led to more hearings, more people and more exposure to the infected prosecutor.
"We just can't stop," said Douglas County District Court administrator Doug Johnson. "The spigot has to keep spinning because people are coming in to jail.
"But yes, I'm concerned. I'm in (the courthouse's) tiny elevators every day. We're obviously violating the social

distancing (guidelines) in there. We’ve got to plug through this thing and hope that this too shall pass.”
The building commission on Wednesday sent crews in to deep-clean the courtrooms and back rooms where the prosecutor was.
Scrubbing, while necessary, does little to cure the worry, Wayne said. The state senator said too many officials, national and local, are hoping rather than acting in the face of a virus that doesn’t yield to hope. Wayne spent part of Monday searching his mind as to whether he ran into the prosecutor over the past two weeks. He spent part of Tuesday trying to see if an eviction hearing was taking place.
He found out it was — and started worrying about the down-on-their-luck clients who will risk exposure as they try to defend their homes or, in criminal court, their freedom.
Wayne said he begrudgingly planned to venture to the courthouse Wednesday, wearing gloves and a mask.
The prosecutor’s case “proves the point,” Wayne said. “We’ve got that many people directly exposed. This is going to be a workers’ comp issue if we continue to knowingly put people in harm’s way for their jobs. I mean, what else has to happen before we finally shut it down?”
By Todd Cooper

LJS: Lincoln's 9th case caught coronavirus on trip to Texas; mayor hopes 'tough' early measures blunted local spread

Lincoln health officials have confirmed a ninth case of COVID-19 in the city and identified the newest patient with the disease as a man in his 30s who developed symptoms after returning home from Texas.
The man went to Dallas on March 11 and returned five days later before developing symptoms of COVID-19 on March 21, interim Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department Director Pat Lopez said.
He received the COVID-19 test March 26, and the positive results came back Wednesday.
The people he has been in close contact with have quarantined themselves, she said.
Earlier this week, city and health officials said travel to areas in the U.S. with prevalent spread of the coronavirus had been how patients here acquired it. Only one of the city's nine cases has resulted from the local spread of coronavirus.
Local health department staff continue to monitor 95 people for signs of COVID-19, and 35 cases remain pending at the state's public health lab in Omaha.
So far, 386 people have tested negative for the virus, and an unknown number of tests are pending at private labs. But Bryan Health alone has 283 pending tests, including 243 from its drive-thru clinic launched last week.
Overall, Nebraska had 214 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of Wednesday evening and recorded five deaths from the disease, according to the latest figures from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
Nearly one of every two confirmed cases in Nebraska comes from Douglas County.
During a videoconference with Lincoln Chamber of Commerce members Wednesday, Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said she's hopeful measures the city has taken to blunt the spread will bear fruit.
Early moves Lincoln made, such as not allowing fans at the boys state basketball tournament and closing schools, "have put us in a strong position to fight the virus," she said.
Gaylor Baird noted that not allowing fans at the basketball tournament was "one of the toughest decisions we made early on." But she also said it was vindicated when colleges and pro leagues canceled games shortly after.
She commended residents for doing a good job following recommendations to stay home as much as possible and avoid gathering with others, and she also stressed the importance of people staying home if they are sick.
"If we can stop the spread of the virus and limit it within a household, we've done important, heroic work to protect the rest of the community and to protect all the medical professionals who are on the front lines," Gaylor Baird said.
She said that only time will tell if Lincoln has done enough to flatten the curve and limit COVID-19 infections.
By Riley Johnson

OWH: Offutt service member tests positive for COVID-19

An active duty member at Offutt Air Force Base has tested positive for COVID-19, according to a statement from the Air Force.
It is the first confirmed case of the coronavirus at the base.

The service member is recovering and being closely monitored by medical personnel, officials said. The individual has not come into close contact with anyone outside of the person's house after exhibiting symptoms, according to the statement.
The base has taken protective measures, under Health Protection Condition Charlie, to lessen the risk of exposure to personnel. This includes: social distancing, continued strict hygiene and increased sanitizing measures in common areas.
By Jessica Wade

LJS: COVID-19 model for Nebraska shows range of deaths and health care demands

There's a science to match the new world we're living in now.
It's called outbreak science, and it comes with an important companion: mathematical prediction tools that are garnering a lot of attention.
The White House reviewed a dozen such models recently, and one of its own creation, for making decisions regarding the coronavirus crisis.
But a University of Nebraska Medical Center professor and infectious disease specialist, David Brett-Major, says models are not meant to be answers. They are only meant to be guideposts for planning, and as sentinels for resources.
Some coronavirus model predictions have been criticized for their complexities and uncertainties and the inevitable confusion they cause among a public that wants information, maybe some reassurance.
It's a given that outbreak models will change as their developers learn more about the real numbers of cases, deaths and spread.
"And so it's a numbers-chasing game we have not joined. Or at least I have not," Brett-Major said. "Models are a conversation and not a formulaic output."
A COVID-19 forecast by the respected Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington attracted media attention this week for its state-by-state model.
Originally published March 26, it has been updated twice since. Initial projections of 424 deaths in Nebraska grew to 442 and Wednesday to 448.
The latest projection put the peak for deaths in Nebraska at 15 per day April 24, dropping to zero by June 13.
It assumes continued social distancing and predicts Nebraska will have adequate hospital beds. And there will be a need, the model indicated Wednesday, for 168 ventilators.
A real-time tracking of the virus by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services showed Nebraska's curve is starting sharply upward, with 214 confirmed cases and five deaths, as of Wednesday evening. Douglas County has nearly half of those cases.
The University of Washington model is for the first wave of the illness.
"We seem to be smoldering," Brett-Major said of Nebraska. "We seem to be still early. We probably are experiencing more cases than we know. But on the other hand, we probably are in a better place than most regarding testing."
Nebraska's curve upward in cases will probably be later and, with hope, lower than hard-hit states, he said, and affected by public health directed measures that closed restaurants and schools and mandated no gatherings larger than 10 people.
Brett-Major said for their planning purposes, he and his colleagues look at sources of large data and compile information to know how to provide health services and continue to maintain the medical center system. UNMC is a sounding board for the state and expected to provide a depth of information, working alongside Nebraska public health officials.
He is a member of a group that published an article in "Nature Communications" recently on using outbreak science to strengthen the use of models during epidemics.
Infectious disease modeling has played a prominent role in recent outbreaks, but integrating it into public health decision-making has been challenging, the article says.
The group would like to see the way people organize and report on models in emergencies change, with better communication and connections between those who build the models and those public health officials who use them.

Models, for the most part are not bad guesses, Brett-Major said, although there have been guesses that have been wildly wrong, such as during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014-2016.
With the coronavirus, investigators are able to look at and get information on its movement from variant influenza viruses, those that start in animals and move to humans.
"Even though this coronavirus probably does transmit more easily than a usual new strain of flu, there's a lot more experience with this, so we kind of know that it's going to be common," he said. "We know that it's going to spread in a way with which we're accustomed. And we know there's not a lot of immunity in the population to slow it down yet."
Weather can cause breaks in the patterns. And when this virus comes around again, there will be more immunity to lessen it some, and then it will go in cycles and eventually be one of the common coronaviruses that are seen, he said.
"In fairness, the rest of it might be predicted even better than the stock market," he said.
By JoAnne Young

OWH: UNMC study suggests coronavirus has airborne transmission potential, but not like measles

An early study by University of Nebraska Medical Center researchers and others has found some potential for airborne transmission of the novel coronavirus.
But it's not the type of spread associated with highly contagious airborne diseases such as the measles and chickenpox.
The researchers stressed, however, that their findings do not confirm that the virus spreads in an airborne fashion. While they recovered the virus's genetic material in the samples they collected, more study is underway to determine whether they captured live virus that can be grown in the lab. Additional evidence also is needed to determine the risk of airborne transmission of the virus.
"It doesn't appear to spread like classic airborne viruses," said Dr. Mark Rupp, chief of UNMC's infectious diseases division. "We're not seeing that with COVID-19."
Many things, in fact, still aren't known about the virus and how it spreads, including how much it takes to infect another person. The report, published in an online archive before peer review by outside scientists, is one of many that researchers around the world are conducting and publishing rapidly as they seek to get a better handle on the virus.
In this case, the researchers collected samples from the air, in bathrooms and from surfaces in 11 isolation rooms that housed some of the original 13 people who tested positive for COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus, after being rescued from a stricken cruise ship.
The 13 were among a total of 15 passengers who were monitored and treated in the Nebraska Biocontainment Unit and the National Quarantine Unit, both on the UNMC campus, between mid-February and mid-March. The researchers are affiliated with UNMC, Nebraska Medicine and the University of Nebraska's National Strategic Research Institute.
The study found high levels of contamination by the virus, detected by genetic testing, on commonly used surfaces and in the air of patients' rooms. Air samples from hallways outside of rooms where staff were moving in and out of doors also were positive.
The study suggests that COVID-19 patients, even those who are only mildly ill, may create aerosols of virus and contaminate surfaces that may pose a risk of transmission.
The findings, the researchers wrote, suggest that the virus might be spread through both larger droplets produced when people cough or sneeze and person-to-person contact, as well as through indirect contact with contaminated objects and airborne transmission.
Rupp said the study doesn't do much to change recommendations for the general public. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has posted guidance on how to prevent spread through close contact with family members, including limiting an infected person to a separate bathroom and bedroom if possible.
That guidance includes information on properly cleaning surroundings if someone has a respiratory illness. The virus is believed to be killed relatively easily by a long list of household cleaners.
It does, however, emphasize the need for aggressive social distancing. "This will really crimp down the transmission of this virus from person to person in society," Rupp said in a discussion of the study on Facebook Live.

Rupp said he did not believe the general public needed to wear masks.
Whether to recommend that the public wear cloth masks when out and about is a matter the CDC reportedly is reviewing. Any recommendation, however, is expected to come with the caveat that medical masks be reserved for health care providers.
The study also shows how important it is for health care workers caring for COVID-19 patients to take precautions against virus transmission, said John Lowe, UNMC's vice chancellor for Inter-professional Health Security Training and Education.
"That means wearing the proper personal protective equipment, using negative air pressure rooms for these patients whenever possible and being mindful about the method of entering and exiting these rooms," he said.
Dr. James Lawler, director of the Global Center for Health Security at UNMC, said teams who were caring for the cruise ship passengers were taking such precautions and will continue to do so, even as the number of patients increases.
More research, however, is needed to characterize the virus's environmental risk.
By Julie Anderson

OWH: One small Nebraska town waits and wonders: What will be left after coronavirus?

DODGE — Sitting alone on a bar stool at his deserted small-town tavern, Dave Brester contemplated the future.
The Merry Martini is a major gathering place in this farm town, 18 miles northwest of Fremont. But in the last couple of weeks, the afternoon card players quit coming, as did the after-work crowd, and the Friday afternoon club.
Instead, the sign on the door reads, "Dodge County closed us. Carry outs only." And a tub near the entrance holds bottles of wine selling for only $5 each.
There's not much to do, said Brester, 73, who's owned the bar Merry Martini for 28 years.
"We don't have anyone in here. Carry out is the only thing that's going to carry us through," he said. "But it's going to get tougher … and it's not just us, it's going to effect everyone."
Dodge, population 597, is dealing with the coronavirus crisis like lots of small towns in Nebraska. There's plenty of uncertainty, concern and even confusion about how to carry on with life in a world where the all the schools are closed, social activities are suspended, and you need to stand six feet apart when you go to the grocery store or walk down the sidewalk.
Even Mass at the town's St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church, which looms over Dodge from the top of a hill, has been cancelled.
There's never been anything like this before, said Kathy Kauffold, who's been putting out the weekly Dodge Criterion newspaper for 57 years.
"It's the first time in the history of America that all the churches are closed for Easter," she said. "That's sad."
There's some sense here that the virus might bypass Dodge, and that it's mostly a big city problem. But there's also a growing awareness, as more and more restrictions are announced and more cases are identified in Dodge County and elsewhere, that it really isn't.
"In Dodge, I think we have a false sense of security — it's not going to get here. But it is going to get here," said Jody Stecher, a personal banker at Farmers State Bank in Dodge.
The bank's lobby has been closed for two weeks — drive-thru and online banking only — and its electronic sign flashes a huge "closed" sign in announcing the status of the town library.
Bank employees are alternating — half working at home and half working behind the locked doors of the bank.
"It's tough to survive in a small town anyway, and then you have to close your business or alter the way you do business," Stecher said. "It's hard having to see businesses struggle."
So Stecher and a couple of friends organized a "Corona Cruise and Bear Hunt" on Sunday evening, inviting area residents to drive through town and document where they found bear dolls and signs posted in windows of Dodge businesses and homes.
An estimated 100 tractors, pickups, cars, golf carts, grain trucks and even a combine showed up, after first doing a drive through nearby Howells. Up to 143 bears were counted. Similar cruise nights have been held in several other Nebraska towns, too, to relieve the monotony.
"We had a little fun," said Kristine Uhing, a bookkeeper at the 2nd Street Market. "People needed to get out into a little sunshine."

Her son, Mason, also got to drive his new van, painted like the one in “Scooby Doo,” at a cruise. His initial plan was to drive it to prom, which was cancelled.
The cruisers supplied a boost to local businesses, stopping for burgers and fries at the Hilltop Lanes bowling alley, “tastee” sandwiches at the Dodge City Bar, and to-go cocktails and beer at Merry Martini.
“If you want businesses at the end of this, you need to support them. They need it right now,” said Stecher, who is a distant relative of Dodge’s most famous resident, Joe Stecher, a three-time, world wrestling champ a century ago.
Social distancing? Well, that was a little relaxed during the Corona Cruise, townspeople said, as groups stood along the main street and piled together into vehicles.
Stecher said she’s probably violating social distancing rules by regularly checking on her 88-year-old grandmother.
“I’ve been told. I’ve got to clean up my ways,” she said.
But Dodge has plenty of older residents, and Stecher said she worries about them and the isolation. They can’t go to church, can’t go to card groups, can’t get together for coffee.
“I keep my circle (of contacts) small,” she said, to limit contracting or spreading the virus.
At the town nursing home, Parkview Home, visitors have been banned for a couple of weeks, “window” visits only. There’s extra cleaning and extra checks, per guidelines from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
At the Dodge grocery store, business was brisk at midday on Monday, with customers trying to avoid one another in narrow aisles and standing apart at the check-out stand. Carry-out grocery service is now available, and home deliveries have been expanded to every day of the week, and at no charge.
Chairs at the lunch area have been removed at the supermarket. The normal lunch crowd can’t gather there anyway. But Monday’s lunch special — two pork brisket sliders for $3 — was proving a popular take-out item.
There were a couple of rolls of toilet paper left on the shelves on Monday, but they were gone by Tuesday. There’s been no deliveries of toilet paper, or products like hand sanitizer and rubbing alcohol for the past couple of weeks, and cheese and eggs are also hard to get, said 2nd Street Market owner Malinda Kempf.
The problem isn’t her customers, Kempf said, but a lack of deliveries from warehouses, which reportedly still lack several products.
“We’re kind of out here in the bohunks,” she said. “So we don’t get the big store stuff.”
But except for the local dental office and, just this week, the Dodge City Bar, businesses were open in Dodge. Farm trucks rumbled to the grain elevator; a fork lift driver loaded a cattle chute at a manufacturing outlet; gas was still being pumped at the filling station at the end of the block.
Package deliveries are as robust as during Christmas, according to Dodge Postmaster Lynn Harms.
“People are bored so they’re deciding, ‘Let’s order something online,’" Harms said.
At the local newspaper, Kauffold was working her afternoon shift, alternating with the Criterion’s other employee who works mornings and then sanitizes the office.
But with no spring sports to cover, no spring concerts and few community events to promote and advertise, it’s a struggle, she said. “Our school superintendent hopes to have some kind of graduation ceremony. Maybe it will be outside,” Kauffold said.
Overall, folks in Dodge are like folks everywhere else — wondering when this is going to end, wondering if someone they know might get infected, wondering what will be left when it’s over. Will that be a month? Or months?
There have been no confirmed cases of coronavirus in Dodge, but there had been four cases reported in Dodge County as of noon Wednesday, and one in Cuming County, just a mile to the north.
This Sunday in Dodge, there will be another Corona Cruise to support local businesses. But this time, hearts will be placed in windows instead of bears. It’s the least that can be done in these uncertain times, Stecher said.
“I think eventually it’s going to be OK,” she said. “It’s just going to take while.”
By Paul Hammel

OWH: Traffic plunges across Nebraska amid pandemic. But are we still driving too much?

Traffic across Nebraska has plummeted on streets and highways as people shelter to fight the novel coronavirus. Different counts suggest Dodge Street traffic through central Omaha has dropped by half, while Interstate traffic is down by 41% from Lincoln to Iowa.
The data shows an incredible turn as society pivots in response to the pandemic. But amid the calls to stay home for the greater good, the figures also raise the question: Are people still driving too much?

Unacast, an international analytics company that uses cellphone location data, has created a "Social Distancing Scoreboard" rating the United States, individual states and counties on how much they're cutting their travel and nonessential visits.

Nebraska rates a C- for its behavioral changes, although it's unclear how traffic from the continued flow of vital interstate trucking traffic factors into the state's grade. Douglas County rates a C.

Greg Youell, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency, said he drove down a nearly empty Dodge Street one evening recently, and it felt almost eerie.

But he said the traffic that remains is often the people who need to take their trips the most, including doctors, nurses and people supporting vital services.

"It's good that they're there," Youell said, "and it's kind of a lifeline for keeping everything going in this unprecedented time."

Tuesday, the Nebraska Department of Transportation released traffic figures showing the slowdown cascade through March.

In the first week of March, traffic volumes were up 2% compared with the March average for the three-year period from 2016 to 2018. By the third week of March, traffic was down 19%, and then 29% by last week.

The Interstate showed the biggest drops. Traffic was down 41% on Interstate 80 from Lincoln to Iowa and in Omaha on Interstates 480 and 680. Traffic volume was down 36% on I-80 west of Lincoln.

Other Douglas County and Sarpy County highways and streets were down 28% by the end of March.

The data comes from the department's system of 67 automated, continuous traffic counters across the state.

Kyle Schneweis, the Department of Transportation's director, said Nebraska's freight traffic remains at near-normal levels. He said the department will continue analyzing the data to understand the impacts and trends.

Jeff Riesselman, the City of Omaha's traffic engineer, said the city is looking at its available traffic numbers, too. They appear to be in line, he said, with the state's figures and traffic numbers nationally.

Wednesday, the city released a collection of traffic figures compared with the last week of February. The numbers were measured at three intersections with radar detection signals:

- 144th Street and West Center Road: -44%
- 72nd and Grover Streets: -39%
- 120th and L Streets: -36%

On Dodge Street between 69th and 93rd Streets, traffic volumes were down 52%. On 84th Street from Center Street to Lincoln Street in Papillion, volumes were down 35%.

For Douglas County, the Unacast scoreboard indicates that the average distance traveled was down about 47%. According to the company, nonessential trips in Douglas County were down about 61%.

By Jeffrey Robb

OWH: Former middle school teacher convicted of having sex with student dies in prison

A former Lincoln middle school teacher who was convicted of first-degree sexual assault of a minor has died in prison.

Jackson Hedrick, 27, died about 8:30 a.m. Wednesday at a Lincoln hospital, according to a spokeswoman for the Nebraska Corrections Department. He was serving a 20- to 30-year sentence that began in December 2015.

The cause of death has not been determined, the spokeswoman said. Whenever someone dies in custody in Nebraska, a grand jury is called to conduct an investigation.

Hedrick was a first-year social studies teacher at Irving Middle School when he was arrested on suspicion of enticement by electronic communication device. After further investigation, Hedrick was charged with first-degree sexual assault of a 14-year-old female student from the school.

Hedrick also was an assistant cross country coach at Lincoln Southeast High School. He graduated from that high school in 2010.

By Kevin Cole

LJS: COVID-19 complicating college student census count

The goal of the 2020 U.S. Census is to "count everyone once, only once and in the right place," the bureau's

marketing materials say, with the right place being where each person was living April 1.
In this year's count, the "right place" for nearly 12 million full-time students across the country is where they are pursuing higher education, either their on-campus residence hall or off-campus house or apartment, even if it's not their permanent address.
But the spread of the coronavirus and the subsequent closing of college and university dormitories across the country displaced thousands of students from where they normally would have been residing on what's known as Census Day.
The implications of undercounting the student population in cities such as Lincoln and Omaha, both home to multiple institutions that host thousands of students annually, as well as small college towns across the state, could be huge.
Millions of dollars in federal funding are at stake each year, and an undercount of as few as 1,000 people could result in Lincoln losing an estimated $21 million for education needs or infrastructure projects over the next decade, Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said last fall.
Counting college students in their rural hometowns rather than the urban centers where they spend most of their year could be felt for the next decade, too, as next year's redistricting process will rely on this year's census.
To ensure Nebraska's count of residents is in line with federal guidelines, university and local government officials are imploring students to complete the census by listing where they would have been living had the spread of COVID-19 not forced them to leave campus.
"It's so important for university and college students to be counted where they are attending school because they are using those streets, they are using the medical system," said Josie Gatti Schafer, director of the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
"All that money is tied to the census," she said, adding there are three ways on-campus students can be counted this year.
* Campus officials can turn over administrative data about who is living in university-sponsored housing.
* Students still living there can respond to the questions online, by phone or mail.
* Or, they wait for a census worker to knock on their door for a face-to-face interview in the weeks ahead.
The NU system, through its own Complete Count working group that included representatives from each campus, coordinated with the Census Bureau to turn over records about who was living in traditional dormitories, suite-style residence halls and even Greek houses this year.
That means more than 11,000 NU students across the state will be automatically recorded at their campus address, including roughly 7,500 students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, according to Lesley Esters, director of assessment and staff development for the Office of Student Affairs.
But Esters said UNL is concerned about how the students who live in apartments or rental houses off-campus may be counted, particularly if those individuals returned to their parents' homes or elsewhere to ride out the pandemic.
"There's always the potential when a student relocates, their participation could be impacted," she said.
NU is encouraging those students through a series of public service announcements and email marketing to fill out the census online, over the phone, or by mail, listing their address as where they were living on campus.
Gaylor Baird said the Lincoln-Lancaster County Complete Count Committee has also worked "to impress upon the public the importance of completing the census ... including the tens of thousands of students that attend college in Lincoln."
"With the sudden departure of so many students, we are concerned that they will be undercounted," Gaylor Baird said. "Students should understand that they are supposed to fill out the census based on where they live the majority of the year."
The committee worked with UNL and the local Census Bureau office on outreach efforts starting last fall, while students in the broadcasting program within the College of Journalism and Mass Communications worked on a semester-long project to promote the census for students, she added.
Still, Lancaster County Board Chair Sean Flowerday said it will be tough to get college students counted where they are living while attending college.
As chair of the Complete Count Committee, Flowerday said he's concerned COVID-19-related closures of several campuses in the Capital City could hurt the county's census reporting further.
And students still considered dependents by their parents for tax purposes may be classified that way on the census in their household, Flowerday added.

Schafer said the Census Bureau is aware of both problems — the potential undercount in college towns, as well as the potential for duplication of some students — and has built tools to sort through the responses and ensure each student is counted once, only once and in the right place.
David Drozd, a research coordinator at UNO's Center for Public Affairs Research, said the extent of COVID-19's impact on the census won't be apparent until the data are released.
"It's hard to tell at this point how that is actually going to turn out given all the disruptions in living situations, as well as in census operations," he said. "We won't really know or be able to analyze the counts until they are released next spring."
By Chris Dunker

OWH: Former Omaha TV meteorologist arrested, accused of threatening county health director

A former Omaha TV meteorologist and spokesman for then-Mayor Jim Suttle is accused of threatening to "lynch" and slit the throat of Douglas County Health Director Adi Pour.
Ronald G. Penzkowski, who went by the name Ron Gerard, was arrested about 5:45 p.m. Tuesday on suspicion of making terroristic threats and stalking. He is being held in the Douglas County Jail awaiting a Thursday bail hearing.
Douglas County Sheriff's Capt. Wayne Hudson said at a press conference Wednesday that Pour had received multiple "threatening and disturbing" emails — 15 to 30 — from someone about the coronavirus response by health officials. The emails, which were sent to Pour's work email account, were traced back to Penzkowski, Hudson said.
The emails referred to public health measures such as shelter-at-home orders, he said. The sender apparently tried to disguise where the emails were coming from, Hudson said, but forensics work and subpoenas of email and Internet accounts tied the emails to Penzkowski, 57.
Lt. William Rinn said investigators are looking into whether several email accounts can be tied to Penzkowski.
The first emails were sent March 20, officials said, and the Sheriff's Office was notified March 25.
The Sheriff's Office and the Omaha Police Department had officers monitor Pour's house and office starting last week, Hudson said.
On Tuesday, deputies went to Penzkowski's Omaha home with a search warrant. He refused to speak to deputies, Rinn said. Pour will still need to be interviewed by deputies, he said.
Deputies seized the cellphone they believe was used to send the emails, Rinn said. He declined to say whether weapons were found in the home but said Penzkowski does not have any guns registered to him.
Additional investigative work will be done to comb through Penzkowski's cellphone to determine whether he made additional threats on social media or to others, Rinn said.
Chief Deputy Sheriff Tom Wheeler said that Pour and her staff have been working tirelessly and that all public servants must be able to make difficult decisions without fear, intimidation or physical harm.
"They make those decisions with one common goal, and that's to protect the public," he said. "If we get further reports of public officials being threatened, we're going to take them seriously and we're going to investigate them thoroughly."
Penzkowski served as spokesman and director of communications for Omaha Mayor Jim Suttle. He was a field operations director during Suttle's election campaign and was named communications director when Suttle took office in June 2009. Before that, Penzkowski worked as a meteorologist at Omaha TV stations KPTM and KETV.
He left the communications post with the Suttle administration in October 2010. Pour has worked as the Douglas County health director since 2002. She declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation.
Chris Rodgers, president of the Douglas County Board of Health, said Pour told him last week about the threatening emails.
"This has put her in a light that she's definitely prepared to, but doesn't relish having to, make these decisions. She understands how hard this is, but the No. 1 thing is trying to stay ahead of this curve," he said. "Dr. Pour has always operated with integrity, and she's got a lot of equity in this community, and I think that's why people are looking to her in this time of need and trust in the words that she's saying."
Rodgers said he thought the emails had a sexist undertone.
"Guys are taking these shots at them because they're women making decisions," he said, referring both to Pour and Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert.
He reminded people to take public health decisions seriously — to stay at home unless necessary, to avoid being in

groups of more than 10 people and to practice social distancing by staying 6 feet away from one another.
"We're confident in (Pour's) abilities and we support her 100%," he said. "Give us patience on this. These are unusually strange times."
By Alia Conley

OWH Editorial: This troubling Iowa case shows need to monitor medical staff

News accounts over the years have told how, in various states, child-abusing teachers in some instances were able to find employment in a series of school districts due to a lack of data-sharing among districts. School officials have responded by stepping up interdistrict communications. A troubling case in Iowa shows the harm that can occur when the health care system fails to rigorously monitor for criminal conduct among its ranks.
In the Iowa case, a nurse, Katie Boll, was able to keep finding work in one institution after another despite her misconduct in handling narcotics — stealing painkillers intended to relieve the suffering of elderly patients. This occurred on at least 50 occasions.
"I knew my mom was in pain," Joyce Becker of Dundee, Iowa, said of her 92-year-old mother, Alice Bandy. "So I kept asking the nurses, 'Can you give her something for the pain?' And they said, 'She's already on morphine.' Well, then we later came to find out she wasn't getting any of it. It was quite a shock. Mom really trusted everyone out there."
At one nursing home, Boll harmed 14 patients. The oldest was 101 years old.
The vast majority of medical staff hold to high professional standards, of course, and that's especially the case as the Midlands medical community has mobilized with extraordinary resolve to address the virus emergency. But the need to monitor for bad apples is imperative, the same as for any other profession.
"Health facilities don't share information about past employees' misconduct," the Iowa Capital Dispatch concluded in its investigation of the Boll case. "Licensing boards don't tell the public about criminal convictions of the professionals they oversee, and state inspectors don't always sanction the facilities where the crimes are committed."
Last July, federal prosecutors charged Boll with one count of tampering with a consumer product and 16 counts of acquiring controlled substances by misrepresentation, fraud, deception and subterfuge. As part of a plea bargain, Boll agreed to relinquish her nursing license, and prosecutors dropped 15 of the 17 charges against her. She was sentenced to four years in prison.
"Do no harm," the Hippocratic Oath says. It's vital for the health care community to monitor for any staff members who callously violate that all-important principle.

OWH: Schools right to oppose bill

After reading the Midlands Voices pieces by State Sens. Tom Briese (March 28) and Mike Groene (March 22) lauding Legislative Bill 1106 as the panacea to lower property taxes and support schools, I have to respond. Lowering property taxes while doing no harm to other state programs and needs is like constructing a household budget — equalizing money coming in with expenses going out, and trying to add savings for a rainy day. Nebraska can't take out a loan; money in must equal money out.
In LB 1106, the authors promise an additional $500 million in state aid to schools to replace lost property taxes, an additional cost to the state budget without increasing other taxes or cutting some budget cost. Previous attempts to lower property taxes cut costs or increased sales or income taxes or both, and they all failed passage. How can senators now offer a bill that does not cut costs or raise taxes but adds a $500 million expense?
Senators want school parents to trust that the funds to replace lost property taxes will be there in the future. However, research of legislative reactions when anticipated dollars did not arrive will show cuts to school state aid were always a target. Also, anything promised by state senators now can be changed by future legislatures, so at best, LB 1106 is a one-year deal.
Now, the COVID-19 challenge and slowing of the state revenue growth will dry up future funds to pay for the promised state aid even next year. What will a new Legislature do then? If you want to know why school groups don't support LB 1106, now you know. It is not about control; it is about trust. LB 1106 may lower property taxes, but it doesn't stabilize state school aid as reported. Until a bill can do both, I'd recommend a no vote.
Chuck Chevalier, Springfield, Neb.

LJS Editorial, 4/2: Right time for fresh start for State Fair

It is time to hit reset on the Nebraska State Fair.
With last week's departure of Executive Director Lori Cox, a serious rift within the State Fair Board and an ongoing investigation into "suspicious activity" in the fair's finances, the fair is in administrative turmoil.
Following last year's disastrous fair, which had a reported $1.7 million loss, the fair is in financial turmoil as well.
Some of the financial hit can't be blamed on the fair's operations or administration. Heavy rains drenched the fairgrounds, leading to a 10% drop in attendance and a 12% drop in gate revenue.
But significant spending on concerts also was a major contributor to the loss, the second consecutive year the fair has lost money after a decade of success -- and profitable events -- in Grand Island.
The loss forced the board to take out a $1.1 million line of credit, lay off 10 of its 17 employees and reduce entertainment costs by $700,000.
While necessary steps, the layoffs, entertainment cuts and credit payments will weaken the fair for years to come.
The rift in the board, reflected by a series of 6-5 votes, is troubling for two reasons. First, it indicates no strategy for the fair moving forward is acceptable to a broad majority of those appointed to govern it.
Second, board member Jeremy Jensen, one of the five board members losing on the split vote, has stated that there is a "coalition" of six board members who took part in "secret vote counting" regarding Cox's termination prior to a canceled board meeting last month.
And Legacy Communications, which owns several Grand Island radio stations, sued last year over alleged violations of the open-meetings act, including not following the rules for the use of executive session.
Regardless of whether they are proved to the letter of the law, Jensen's charges and the suit's allegations make it imperative that the board operate with the utmost transparency -- if, for no other reason, than to restore its credibility to properly manage the fair.
It also must come up with a plan for future fair operations that is endorsed not only by a broad majority of board members, but by Nebraskans generally -- a task that could take some time.
With health and safety concerns from the novel coronavirus almost certain to continue into late August, when the 2020 fair is slated to begin, suspending the fair for a year could be a wise move on two fronts, preventing a return flare-up of the virus and allowing time for the fair to get its administrative house and finances in order.
While it continues to face challenges of getting people from Lincoln, Omaha and their suburbs -- more than half the state's population -- to go west for the carnival, livestock shows, food and entertainment, the fair has, until the last two years, been a success in Grand Island.
Perhaps an administrative and operational reset -- along with some luck on the weather front -- will make it successful again in the coming years.

LJS Local View: COVID-19 puts prisons in peril

There is a crisis in Nebraska that has been drawing attention for a while. The Nebraska Department of Corrections is experiencing one of the worst overcrowding epidemics in the country.
Nebraska consistently ranks among the states with the highest prison overcrowding nationwide. And the state will have to declare an overcrowding emergency this summer if numbers don't decrease by July 1.
As a whole, it currently stands at 150% capacity. But Nebraska State Penitentiary is at 187% designed capacity, while Omaha Correctional Center is at 200% and Diagnostic & Evaluation is over 300% capacity. In fact, the ACLU has filed a lawsuit because of the overcrowding and inhumane conditions behind bars.
But there is also a tragic shortage of corrections officers. And the officers there are working double and triple shifts. Combine that with the shortage of health care facilities and providers, and you have some serious issues.
Now inject the novel coronavirus into the equation. These facilities have been ticking time bombs for years (as we saw during the Mother's Day riot in Tecumseh a few years back). With increased illness comes decreased supervision and health care. And with the way inmates are literally stacked on top of each other, there may be no worse of a situation for this pandemic.
I know many of you are reading this and thinking "Who cares? They're criminals." But trust me, there are good men in those facilities who are working extremely hard to turn their lives around. They aren't all murderers and sexual

predators. They're people, people who are much better than their worst mistake.
I know this because, until two months ago, I was one of those people. And that's extremely difficult for me to admit that here. But I think it's important that people understand what our corrections system is up against.
So I know firsthand how ridiculous the problems are. But I also know that there are a lot of good people on both sides doing their best every day.
The unit I was in for 2½ months at D&E was originally designed for 16 people. During my time there, we had 50 to 55 men in our unit, 20 or more of them sleeping on cots on the floor with thin mattresses used by someone else the night before.
There are two showers for the entire unit. At OCC, eight of us shared a room half the size of a shipping container. Social distancing is an absolute impossibility in these conditions. If the coronavirus infiltrates these facilities, they will become literal deathtraps.
Again, this is hard for me to share and admit. But, as with my entire life, I'm hoping to use my experience to create awareness. I'm not sure what the solution is, but this has been a disaster in the making for years. Please keep those men in your hearts.
Bob Wiley lives in Omaha.

AP: US unemployment claims hit record 6.6 million as layoffs accelerate with virus

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 6.6 million Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week, far exceeding a record high set just last week, a sign that layoffs are accelerating in the midst of the coronavirus.
The job cuts are mounting against the backdrop of economies in the United States and abroad that have almost certainly sunk into a severe recession as businesses close across the world.
The figure for last week is much higher than the previous record of 3.3 million reported for the previous week. The surging layoffs have led many economists to envision as many as 20 million lost jobs by the end of April. The unemployment rate could spike to as high as 15% this month, above the previous record of 10.8% set during a deep recession in 1982.
Many employers are slashing their payrolls to try to stay afloat because their revenue has collapsed, especially at restaurants, hotels, gyms, movie theaters and other venues that depend on face-to-face interaction. Auto sales have sunk, and factories have closed.
Stay-at-home orders, imposed by most U.S. states, have intensified pressure on businesses, most of which face rent, loans and other bills that must be paid.
By Christopher Rugaber

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