From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 8-10-20
Date: Monday, August 10, 2020 9:12:35 AM
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Ag Valley Co-op
Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Aug 2020	2.86	-24.00	09:01
Corn	Dec 2020	2.81	-41.00	09:01
Milo	Aug 2020	2.95	-15.00	09:01
Milo	Dec 2020	3.07	-15.00	09:01
Soybeans	Aug 2020	7.74	-95.00	09:01
Soybeans	Dec 2020	7.89	-80.00	09:01
Wheat	Aug 2020	3.70	-44.00	09:01
Wheat	Jul 2021	3.73	-80.00	09:01

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KETV: Governor Ricketts signs bills protecting students from teachers' sexual abuse

Governor
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LJS: Lancaster County reports 21 new COVID-19 cases
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LJS: 12 LPS staff quarantining after 3 teachers test positive
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OWH: Omaha's emergency mask requirement gains support, but two council members want changes
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Scottsbluff SH: Officials: Lack of space in classrooms behind virus concerns
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AP: Obama's Medicaid expansion gainsground

OWH: As lawmakers continue to spar, second round of pandemic relief remains in limbo

AP: Control dispute brews over mask mandates in Iowa

LA Times: U.S. virus cases exceed 5 million

KMTV: Gov. Ricketts signs law protecting those who break into vehicles to rescue children

OMAHA, Neb. (KMTV) — Gov. Pete Ricketts signed into law a bill that gives legal protection to those who break into vehicles to rescue an endangered child.

Sen. Bruce Bostelman of Brainard introduced LB832, which is known as the Good Samaritan law. The bill would provide immunity from civil liability for someone who, for example, breaks a window to save a baby stranded in a hot car.

"When Nebraskans see a child stranded in a hot car, we want them to take action," said Gov. Ricketts. "Sen. Bostelman's bill protects Good Samaritans who do what's needed to rescue a child in danger."

"It's heartbreaking whenever a child is lost from heatstroke after being trapped in a hot vehicle," said Senator Bostelman. "LB 832 raises awareness about these tragedies and empowers Nebraskans to respond when necessary to save a life."

The National Safety Council has launched a "Look before You Lock!" campaign to prevent vehicular heatstroke. Click here to view a list of simple actions that can help keep children safe.

OWH: Installation ceremony for NU President Ted Carter will be held Friday in Lincoln

Ted Carter has spent seven months as the University of Nebraska's president, but on Friday he will finally get his inauguration ceremony.
Carter, the former superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy, will provide comments — a Ted talk of sorts — and many others will speak through videorecorded statements.
Gov. Pete Ricketts, leaders of the NU system and members of the Carter family are expected to attend the ceremony at 2 p.m. at the Lied Center for the Performing Arts in Lincoln. But coronavirus concerns will minimize the duration, audience and pomp of the ceremony.
The ceremony, often called an investiture or installation, will include gowns and music. The music will be previously recorded so that bands and musicians won't have to attend.
Carter's installation follows an NU Board of Regents meeting at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Innovation Campus. That meeting, which will be livestreamed, will start at 8:30 a.m. A link for the regents' meeting will be available at the NU Board of Regents' website. The link for the inauguration will be at nebraska.edu/president/investiture.
Carter will discuss his strategic plans at both events. Among his priorities, he has said, are graduating a higher rate of students, improving campus diversity, fixing rundown facilities and compensating professors more generously.
Carter was chosen last year by the regents to succeed President Hank Bounds, who had resigned.
By Rick Ruggles

LJS: Ted Carter to be installed as NU president on Friday

Ted Carter will be formally installed as the University of Nebraska's eighth president in a virtual ceremony Friday during which he will lay out a multiyear vision for growth and success across the NU campuses.
All Nebraskans are invited to watch the installation, which will begin at 2 p.m. via livestream at nebraska.edu/president/investiture. The university elected to hold a virtual ceremony instead of an in-person event given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
A long-held tradition in academia, an investiture is an opportunity for the university community to formally welcome a new leader and celebrate the work of the institution.
Friday's program will include video greetings from students, faculty, staff, administrators and alumni from across the university system, along with remarks from Gov. Pete Ricketts. Carter will deliver remarks outlining a five-year vision for NU's future, informed by a system-wide strategic planning process that he began shortly after assuming his new role in January.
As the chief executive officer of the four-campus NU system, Carter is responsible for overall university operations and implementation of Board of Regents policies and goals.

KNEB: New Americans Task Force Selected as 'People's Choice' Winner in Million Dollar Google.org Impact Challenge.

Nebraska – Today, New Americans Task Force was named the Google.org Impact Challenge Nebraska 'People's Choice' winner and awarded an additional $125,000, bringing the total awards for Nebraska nonprofits to $1 million total.
Governor Pete Ricketts (R-NE) was on hand to congratulate the winners. "We are very grateful for Google's continued investment in Nebraska," said Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts. "These funds will go far in helping deserving nonprofits create innovative solutions for their communities and accelerate

economic growth across the state."

The virtual celebration included a panel discussion with the local judges for the Impact Challenge and touched on everything from how to operate during the pandemic to best practices for supporting underrepresented communities now and moving forward.

"Google is proud to support the innovative ideas of these five nonprofits as they work to create economic opportunity," said Dan Harbeke, Regional Head of External Affairs for Google. "A special congratulations to our 'People's Choice' winner, New Americans Task Force: Career Ladder. Their mission to provide step-by-step assistance to skilled immigrants and refugees that will help them re-enter their former careers here, in Nebraska, is inspiring and essential."

New Americans Task Force was a finalist for the 'People's Choice' award alongside four other Google.org Impact Challenge Nebraska winners. All five winners received an initial $175,000 last week when Google opened public voting and asked Nebraska to choose the one nonprofit that they believe has put forth the most innovative and impactful proposal to create economic opportunity in their communities.

"It's an honor to be recognized as the 'People's Choice' winner for the Google.org Impact Challenge here in Nebraska," said Lee Kreimer, Programs Manager at the Asian Community & Cultural Center and co-chair of the New Americans Task Force. "We are incredibly excited to provide more tools to New Americans to help them build strong lives as they look to become successful in our community. We are stronger when all of our voices are heard and served."

Google.org Impact Challenge Nebraska 'People's Choice' Winner:

- New Americans Task Force: CareerLadder (Lincoln) – connects Lincoln's immigrants and refugees to high-skill and high-wage career pathways.

Google.org Impact Challenge Winners:

- Greater Omaha Worklab (GrOW) (Omaha) – partners with employers and nonprofit organizations by offering resource navigation and personalized coaching to help people achieve success in their lives.
- Kearney Works (Kearney) – tackles the issue of rural workforce development through services to help clients to be well prepared for the labor pool.
- Metropolitan Community College (Omaha) – prepares Omaha Correctional Center residents for successful re-entry into the workforce.
- Native360 Loan Fund, Inc. (Grand Island) – provides affordable capital and technical assistance to Native American business owners.

The Google.org Impact Challenge Nebraska winners were chosen by an all-star panel of judges including:

- Garry Clark – Executive Director, Greater Fremont Development Council
- Shonna Dorsey – Independent Talent Development Consultant
- Jane Miller – President & Chief Operating Officer, Gallup Inc.
- Owen Palm – CEO, 21st Century Equipment
- Yesenia Peck – Diversity Manager, Nebraska Public Power District and President, Nebraska Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- John Wirtz – Chief Product Officer, Hudl

Google announced the Google.org Impact Challenge Nebraska last year. In their 2019 Economic Impact Report, Google announced that Google that businesses in Nebraska generated $3.58 billion of economic activity for 7,300 Nebraska organizations by using Google's search and advertising tools. The full report details Google's economic impact state-by-state, and features the stories of businesses fueling that growth, creating job opportunities, and transforming their communities.

Hastings Tribune: Mayor feuds with DHHS over HRC plans

Hastings' mayor and the head of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services are clashing over plans to move troubled youth to the Hastings Regional Center campus.

On July 15, DHHS announced plans to transition the female Youth Rehabilitation & Treatment Center program to the Hastings Regional Center campus in October. The department would move the current clinical programming in Hastings — substance use disorder services for male youth — to the Whitehall campus in Lincoln.

To accommodate the YRTC, DHHS plans to renovate a newly finished building designed for SUD services, otherwise known as a chemical dependency program.

In a letter sent Thursday to the state agency's CEO, Dannette Smith, and copied to media, Mayor Corey Stutte said the Hastings facility was built for the chemical dependency program, but has never been occupied. He said the walls would need to be reinforced, windows would need to be replaced, and fencing and other security measures would need to be installed for it to be ready for the YRTC to move into. He also questioned the source of the funding for the renovations.

"I once again find myself deeply disappointed with your agency," Stutte said. "The lack of transparency to our community, the Legislature, the taxpayers and your employees is disheartening. We want this successful program to remain in Hastings, and I urge you to use the facility at HRC as it was appropriated, intended and constructed for."

Khalilah LeGrand, director of communication for DHHS, provided a statement addressing Stutte's concerns.

"CEO Smith continues to be clear and transparent in her communication and thoughtful and methodical in her approach to decision-making," she said. "She has already had two meetings with Mayor Stutte. The most recent convening included representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, law enforcement, the county attorney, members of the City Council and other key stakeholders from Hastings. The tenor of the meeting was one wherein participants were open to continued dialogue.

"Moreover, three committees were established during the meeting that will address community engagement, campus planning and public safety. CEO Smith looks forward to meeting with the mayor again soon and continued cooperation with the community."

LeGrand said they are in process of making some additional improvements to bring the buildings up to regulation, which entail applying a coating over the drywall, adding film to the windows and installing a fence.

"While there will be some additional costs for these structural enhancements, DHHS has continually prioritized the best interest of youth when making decisions," she said. "This includes ensuring the proper educational, behavioral and environmental supports, so that these young people and their families will be better prepared for their successful transition back into the community. The development of the YRTC System is aimed at addressing the individual needs of the youth in treatment."

Because the building was built for the specific purpose of housing a chemical dependency program, Stutte said, it would take legislative action to repurpose it for another use.

Stutte shared information he received from the Legislative Fiscal Office on Friday:

"Hastings Regional Center is a separate program under DHHS that is appropriated funding separately from all other DHHS programs. The original appropriation in 2013 for the Hastings Regional Center Chemical Dependency Program was $5,210,000. These funds cannot be moved without changes in legislation."

Stutte also was disappointed to discover through a third party that the department planned to move forward with plans to move the chemical dependency program to Lincoln even though the YRTC move had been postponed to March 2021.

LB1140, which was passed by the Nebraska Legislature on July 31, prohibits the establishment of a new YRTC or establishment or move of an YRTC to a new or existing state or private facility until March 30, 2021, after the completion of the required planning process. Gov. Pete Ricketts signed the bill into law.
Stutte said the passage of the bill should have caused the department to delay all the transitions in the plan, including moving the chemical dependency program from Hastings to Lincoln.
"If this is your plan, it certainly seems to go against the spirit of the legislative action taken last month and the fact that I've learned about this secondhand indicates that our discussions to this point have not taken place in good faith," Stutte wrote to Smith. "Once again, I don't appreciate learning this from a third party. We deserve better from our state agencies — especially from a CEO who looked me in the eyes and told me that they were here to work with our community."
LeGrand said DHHS will be required to submit an operations plan prior to the move for the YRTC transition, but the chemical dependency program move is separate.
"The SUD program is not impacted by this legislative action, and that program remains on schedule to transition in October," she said. "DHHS continues to prepare for the YRTC transition to Hastings in March, where the female youth will participate in programming from newly-completed facilities. DHHS will work with teammates in Hastings to identify their best options to continue serving Nebraska youth, both during the period between the SUD transfer away from Hastings and the YRTC transfer to Hastings, and longer term."
In accordance with employee labor contracts, and the specific needs of the various youth facilities around the state, LeGrand said current employees in Hastings may continue to work in Hastings or transfer to one of the other facilities. Hastings employees will receive training for new assignments as necessary. DHHS leadership continues to provide updates to staff as appropriate. No reduction in Hastings staffing is planned.
Taylor Gage, the governor's public relations director, said Ricketts supports Smith's plans for both the YRTC and SUD programs.
But Stutte said the employee profiles are much different between those addressing substance abuse and the staff of a YRTC.
Instead of moving the successful chemical dependency program from HRC, Stutte proposes that another building be constructed to house youth for the YRTC program. Considering the money that would be spent to retrofit the original building for YRTC use, he said, his proposal could be more cost-effective.
"There's plenty of room out there on the regional center campus," he said. "When we're already going to be spending money on the building, I think it's smarter to apply that money to a new building. We have the work force to be able to support both programs."
By Will Vraspir

LJS: Cindy Lange-Kubick: On hold for unemployment help — 'I've never gotten to speak to anyone'

DeAnna Stewart is waiting.
She's waited seven weeks for her first unemployment check.
She's waited hours for someone to answer the state Department of Labor helpline.
She waited for 45 minutes the morning she called promptly at 8 a.m. and was told she was No. 1 in the queue, then went crazy listening to the tinkling of pre-recorded piano music.
"I finally hung up," Stewart said last week, taking a break from her part-time job delivering flowers. "It's smash-your-head-into-the-wall type of stuff."

Plenty of people are smashing their heads into walls in 2020.
The state ombudsman's office has received 408 unemployment complaints so far this year, Deputy State Ombudsman Carl Eskridge said. He expects the number — which averaged 18 a year the past five years — to top 600.
That seems about right. The system is flooded with tens of thousands of new claims.
An endless queue of filers left jobless by a pandemic.
Between the third week of March and the first of August, the Nebraska Department of Labor has recorded 165,255 regular unemployment claims and 38,206 pandemic assistance claims, spokeswoman Grace Johnson said.
That doesn't count the ongoing weekly claims for payment — 65,329 last week alone.
Those paid to help are toiling away.
Approximately 50 contracted workers are answering phones, Johnson said.
And in late April, Gov. Pete Ricketts awarded a $1.7 million emergency contract to Nelnet, authorizing the temporary hiring of 58 Nelnet employees to help 70 Nebraska Department of Labor adjudicators — more are being hired — with the logjam.
The call specialists resolve the problems they can, Johnson said, and refer the rest to a claims specialist or adjudicator.
The department has a goal: 75% of first payments in your pocket within 28 days.
Last month, it inched past it by a half a percentage point. (And it's exceeded that by double digits in the past.)
Ombudsman Eskridge understands the challenges.
"They've had so many more claims than they've ever had before. It's been overwhelming."
He also understands the frustration of the unemployed whose claims are in limbo.
"The phone call system has not worked at all," he said. "That's the most frustrating part."
Department of Labor staff are working hard, he said. Nine-hour days and weekend hours, too.
"They need to be encouraged."
But technology isn't helping as much as it should, he said, including the website and its format for applying.
"That's a whole different problem … other states have had a lot of issues with their unemployment problems using that process."
LaShara Ways can verify that.
The first several weeks she tried to file for post-pandemic unemployment — after a job she was set to start March 23 fell through March 22 — she couldn't figure out how to complete the application.
When she finally figured it out, her claim kept showing up as pending.
She called the help line (855-995-8863) and waited on hold — No. 80 in line.
"Eventually, it offered me the option to be called without losing my place."
She took it.
Three-and-a-half hours later, her phone rang. She was washing her hands and couldn't answer in time.
She rushed to return the call. Now there were 130 people ahead of her in the queue and the office was closing in 90 minutes.
"I've never gotten to speak to anyone."
She's hanging on, Ways said Friday, but barely.
She's still working 10 hours a week at her airport job (the one she planned to quit for a better paying gig in March). But she still hasn't received her $1,200 stimulus check or the refund from the federal tax return she filed in May.
"I'm scraping by on a tiny little paycheck and thank God for my parents."

Stewart is hanging on, too.
She'd quit her full-time job in early March to focus on the nonprofit she'd started two years ago — at the exact wrong pre-pandemic shutdown time — and then waited 13 weeks to qualify for benefits, dutifully logging in every week to file a claim during her "disqualification" period.
She figured the money would start coming the following week. "I thought I'd start getting checks, but I didn't and I still haven't."
And she's tried communicating with the unemployment folks in every way possible, she said.
She's emailed. Sent messages via the website. She's called the unemployment hotline and the governor's office.
"Usually, I'm in tears by the end of the conversation."
So far, the gubernatorial pipeline has been the only way she's had success talking to a real person — and yet she's still dipping into savings waiting for her money.
"Every time you call, you get someone else and you start all over again," she said.
Hello? Can anyone help me?
The Nebraska Department of Labor unemployment help line is 855-995-8863.
The state ombudsman's office is also assisting people having trouble getting unemployment claims resolved.
It can be reached at ombbud@leg.ne.gov or by calling 402-471-2035 or by filling out a complaint form online at nebraskalegislature.gov/divisions/ombud-filing.php
One employee told her she didn't see any reason why she wouldn't be getting checks and that she'd move her case to a claims specialist, Stewart said.
She never heard back.
She called again and was told a change in the law in 2018 meant she didn't qualify.
"I'm really confused."
Thursday, she filed a complaint with the ombudsman's office.
"I just want the money I paid in, I've been working since I was 15."
Eskridge and several employees are working on cases.
State senators refer constituents and citizens simply call. Some are angry and most are frustrated.
"I have had some cases, say moms with kids with disabilities and no money, and they're just desperate," Eskridge said.
Ways figures she'd be homeless with her two kids if she didn't have financial help from family.
"And that can't last forever."
She wants a job — and she's applying for work every week — but she also wants the benefits she is eligible for, or to find out why she isn't.
After my first week of furlough from the Journal Star in mid-April, I filed for unemployment. That check arrived promptly, but I never received the check from my second furloughed week at the end of the month.
I can empathize with Ways and Stewart and the woman who contacted the paper Friday wanting help for an unemployed relative who'd already "jumped through several hoops" working to resolve a claim: She is remaining on hold now about two hours later, listening to the same on-hold music with no voice interruptions. We called the number on a different phone and was caller number 61. … Are you asking why is this silly person contacting the newspaper? Frustration abounds. Work is being sought, unemployment is zero, there is a problem with the unemployment account and here we sit — listening to the same wearing piano music — no help in sight.
I felt her pain. I had also waited on hold until I was ready to choke Chopin.
Johnson from the Department of Labor said wait times vary, but have been averaging a little more than

an hour. Sometimes less.
On Wednesday, the line received 2,581 calls, down 689 from Tuesday.
Like Ways, I have missed call-backs that came hours after I'd left my number. Like Stewart, I waited weeks after being told (by very nice call center specialists) that "someone" would call me back "sometime."
But I did finally get a call.
Thursday afternoon, after I'd contacted the Nebraska Department of Labor about this story.
The nice woman on the line quickly resolved my problem.
I thought I'd share the number with the hundreds of others waiting to resolve their claims and get their money.
But the number that showed up in my call log turned out to be the general helpline number — where I was caller No. 102 at 2:41 p.m.
I waited for 103 minutes until the call abruptly went dead.
When I called back, I was No. 106.
I gave up.
By Cindy Lange-Kubick

OWH: Mask mandate appears to be making a difference in Lincoln

As Omaha debates whether and how and when to set a masking order, Lincoln's mask mandate just might be working.
In the nearly three weeks since the City of Lincoln mandated masks, Lancaster County's average daily count of new cases over seven days has dropped from 48 immediately after the order started to 29 on Friday.
The most recent daily figures are even lower. On Friday, Lancaster County added 22 new cases.
That gets Lancaster County closer to a rate at which University of Nebraska Medical Center experts advise that schools could safely consider reopening — though still higher than recommended.
Lancaster County's positivity rate also is dropping — from 8.3% the week Lincoln's mask mandate started to 5.9% so far this week. Public health experts say a 5% positivity rate or lower points to less community spread of the virus.
"We are encouraged by the trends we've seen," Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said Friday.
Pat Lopez, director of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department, said the trend is moving in the right direction, and officials see a relationship between mask-wearing and decreasing infections.
Still, she cautioned that officials want to see another week of numbers.
"The bottom line is we are seeing fewer infections," Lopez said.
Nebraska's daily average, tallied from the previous seven days of new cases, has sat above 270 new cases a day since July 25. As of Thursday, Nebraska had 294 new cases a day in its seven-day average.
Nebraska was last above 300 new cases a day about May 20.
Douglas County's daily average was 140 as of Friday — and had been around that level for two weeks.
Douglas County was last at that level in early June.
Lincoln's mayor said Friday that Lincoln has not contained community transmission of the virus and a high risk of its spread remains.
With K-12 schools and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln about to return, Gaylor Baird said, "so much is at stake right now."
"We need everyone pulling together to protect this community," she said.
Dr. Mark Rupp, chief of the infectious diseases division at UNMC, said Lincoln's data is consistent with

the dynamics of the virus and suggest that wearing masks has an effect on cases.
Rupp also pointed to reports from Kansas that counties with a mask mandate saw dramatic decreases in cases, compared with no difference in cases for counties where masks were merely recommended.
"When you put it all together, it adds to the data that this does work," Rupp said.
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts is against implementing a mask mandate statewide and threatened a lawsuit as Douglas County's health director moved toward a mask mandate within the city of Omaha.
Dr. Gary Anthone, Nebraska's chief medical officer, said in a statement this week that "our public health experts are closely monitoring the increase in cases, and we're continually evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on the state."
Anthone said that masks matter in the fight against the virus and that Ricketts and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services continue to ask people to wear them, watch their distance and wash their hands.
Said Anthone, "All of us are playing a vital role in the response and progress is dependent on a shared responsibility to protect ourselves and others."
Nebraska's positivity rate continues to be high. From last Friday through Thursday, the positivity rate was 11%.
For the last two weeks, Douglas County's rate has been at or just below 11%, as well.
Since last Saturday, Douglas County has officially recorded two deaths related to COVID-19; 136 people with COVID-19 have died throughout the pandemic.
Statewide, 345 have died as of Friday — up from 332 last Sunday.
Hospital capacity held for the week. Across Nebraska, hospitals had 151 patients with a confirmed COVID-19 case as of Thursday, which is up from 103 on July 25.
Omaha area hospitals had 108 patients with a confirmed COVID-19 case as of Friday's count, up from 72 on July 26.
But in the metro area, the number of patients on a ventilator rose sharply in the last week — from four last Friday to 15 this Friday.
Rupp said that even though COVID-19 figures have not risen dramatically, he sees troublesome signs of a slow wave approaching over the next month.
He warned that the community needs to be extremely careful right now.
"Now is the time you need to take the action."
By Jeffrey Robb

OWH: FDA chief Stephen Hahn urges Nebraskans to follow coronavirus recommendations to slow spread

Nebraskans must stick to the common-sense measures health officials have recommended in order to lower the state's increase in positive test rates, the head of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said Friday.
Wearing masks, staying socially distant, avoiding crowds, washing hands properly and staying home when sick are among the things Nebraskans must do to drive down COVID-19 positivity rates, Dr. Stephen Hahn, the FDA's commissioner, said in a phone interview.
Such steps have worked in parts of the Sun Belt that have mitigated surges in those areas.
"The path forward is with those common-sense measures," Hahn said, noting that "we have it in our power" to slow the outbreak.
Hahn's comments came two days after Dr. Deborah Birx, who serves with Hahn on the White House coronavirus task force, mentioned Omaha as being among 10 areas of the country exhibiting troubling

coronavirus numbers.
Birx also mentioned in a private call with state and local officials that she had seen encouraging signs across the South, although Atlanta remained an area of concern. Details of the call were obtained by the Center for Public Integrity.
Hahn said the first factor the task force uses in evaluating a city or state's risk level is the rate of positive tests it's reporting. Even if it's a relatively small increase, he said, "that's the first sign that there might be community spread."
Douglas County's positivity rate for the current week stood at 10.89% on Friday, although the figure won't be finalized until Sunday night. The number is up from about 7% in mid-July. Weekly tallies of new cases have also increased in the state as a whole over the past several weeks, although some counties have reported no cases in the past 14 days.
Early intervention in such situations is important, Hahn said. State leaders have worked to emphasize the importance of wearing masks and social distancing. Some states have also taken steps such as closing bars.
Birx and President Donald Trump praised Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey on Wednesday for reducing the state's case counts, CNN reported.
After case counts surged earlier this summer, the Arizona governor closed bars, gyms, movie theaters and water parks at the end of June and prohibited events with more than 50 people.
Ducey stopped short of a mask mandate, as has Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts.
Hahn said each state has to figure out the best approach for its residents.
"But it is people following these approaches, that's our way out of this," he said.
Trump said Wednesday that Birx would be visiting Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Arkansas, according to a Fox News report.
Hahn said he was not sure about such a visit.
The FDA, meanwhile, is preparing to review data from large-scale trials for several COVID-19 vaccine candidates.
In a Wednesday opinion piece in the Washington Post, Hahn provided assurances that efforts to develop a vaccine against the novel coronavirus will adhere to all safety standards, despite their accelerated pace.
Hahn wrote that he has been asked repeatedly whether there has been inappropriate pressure placed on the FDA to make decisions that are not based on good data and good science.
"I have repeatedly said that all FDA decisions have been, and will continue to be, based solely on good science and data," he wrote. "The public can count on that commitment."
Any authorized or approved COVID-19 vaccine would need to show that it prevents the disease or decreases its severity in at least 50% of people who are vaccinated, he wrote.
"We're going to call the balls and strikes on this one," he said, "and we're going to do it with our typical high standard."
Hahn also encouraged people who have recovered from COVID-19 to consider donating blood plasma that can be given to ill people. While clinical trials are still underway to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment, it has proven to be safe.
Locally, both the American Red Cross and the Nebraska Community Blood Bank have put out calls for Nebraskans to donate what's known as convalescent plasma.
By Julie Anderson

LJS: City charges Madsen's for defying closure order

The city of Lincoln on Friday night charged Madsen's Bowling & Billiards with violating a closure order, capping a week of tit-for-tat squabbling over alleged violations of directed health measures.
A court date is set for Aug. 28.
Madsen's was still open for business Friday night, seven days after the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department first ordered it closed for what the city's health department said were flagrant violations, which included staff and customers not wearing face masks.
The charge, filed in Lancaster County Court, had not yet reached owner Benjamin Madsen on Friday night, he said.
Violation of the closure order is punishable by a $500 fine and six months in jail.
"As this has not been given to me yet, I have no comment," Madsen said in a text to the Journal Star.
It's unclear if Madsen's will reopen Saturday or if city officials will take further steps to close the business.
On Friday afternoon, Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird appeared to be trying to minimize the ongoing showdown over Madsen's refusal to close for continued violations of local coronavirus restrictions.
The mayor said she remained unconcerned over the appearance of involving police to force a business's shutdown as the fallout from the first challenge over Lancaster County's pandemic restrictions continued to unfold.
“I’m concerned about the health and safety of our community,” Gaylor Baird told reporters at an afternoon news conference. “I’m concerned about keeping schools open, and I’m concerned about our economic recovery. And this conflict is small compared to what’s at stake.”
Madsen’s attorney, J.L. Spray, reached out to the city Friday to ask what the business could do to remain open, Gaylor Baird said.
The Health Department then provided the business with an example of what that plan would look like, but city spokeswoman Diane Gonzolas confirmed Friday night that Madsen's had "not submitted a plan."
On Thursday, hours after a Lincoln judge tossed out the city's complaint seeking an injunction to close the business, Health Department staff observed violations at the business and issued a second closure order.
The Health Department on Friday morning arrived at the business and posted signs saying that Madsen's was closed until authorized to reopen by interim Health Director Pat Lopez.
Madsen arrived a short time later and took down the signs. The business then opened at its normal 11 a.m. time, with a handful of customers filing in for the lunch hour.
"This fight is far from over," Madsen said in a Facebook video Friday morning. "But they will not defeat me. … They pushed back, and I'm going to push back even harder."
City officials Friday continued to express confidence that Madsen’s defiance would not unleash a train of other businesses bucking the local coronavirus rules.
But Lincoln Independent Business Association Executive Director Bud Synhorst, who visited Madsen's on Friday morning, said some business owners are keeping a close eye on the case and more than a dozen local businesses have reached out to LIBA and expressed support for Madsen.
At this point, Madsen's next step is likely to ask for a hearing before the health director.
"We do expect the business to comply," Lopez said of the city's mask mandate and requirement that businesses open to the public implement measures to ensure people are social distancing. "They have to comply."
Back at the bowling alley/pool hall near 48th and Holdrege streets, several lunch-time customers told the Journal Star they chose to patronize the business for the first time after its ownership pushed back against the city's leadership.

Many customers who went into Madsen's in the hours after it opened Friday were wearing or carrying masks, even though the business was not requiring them.
Charlie Troxel said he plays pool with friends every Friday during lunch. While he wears a mask while ordering food and checking out pools balls, his group would later take their masks off because they observe social distancing recommendations.
"We play over in a corner, so we're not interacting with anyone," Troxel said. "We won't wear masks, because we determined we're not infectious."
Richard Esquivel, who was among several people waiting to get into the business when it opened, said he believed the conflict between Madsen's and the city was about the ideals he fought for as a member of the military.
"This is not a health issue to me, this is a constitutional issue," Esquivel said. "The Constitution gives us a right to live. The health issue, everybody's responsible for their own actions. If you don't want to come here, that's fine, you have the right.
"But you should not close the business, you should not take the rights of other people," he added.
On Thursday afternoon, Lancaster County District Judge John Colborn essentially said in his ruling that the city doesn't need a court to order Madsen's to close. It already has a way to get it done: police and deputies.
"The court does not decide, however, whether the directed health measures 2020-07 (the "DHM") is valid, either generally or as applied to Madsen Bowling," he said in the nine-page order.
Asked Friday about the delayed police involvement in the case, Gaylor Baird said the city has sought to focus on education and work with businesses to protect employees and patrons.
“This is obviously an unprecedented situation where someone has not been eager to work with us to keep our community safe,” the mayor said.
City Attorney Yohance Christie said the violation couldn’t be directly compared to the police enforcement of the mayor’s curfew implemented to prevent rioting in May.
Although Colborn’s decision forced the city to enforce its closure order by using the police, the city has sought to treat it as a civil matter, he said.
“The other situation,” he said of the curfew violation response, “was not exactly a civil matter.”
Lincoln is the only city in Nebraska that has a mask mandate, and the Health Department and Gaylor Baird instituted the measure July 20 despite opposition from Gov. Pete Ricketts.
"This is exactly why the governor has opposed mandates in general," Ricketts spokesperson Taylor Gage said of the Madsen's situation Friday. "The better approach would be to focus on education and to seek voluntary compliance, which will have better results for the community in the long run."
Lincoln residents can’t just wish themselves into a time free of coronavirus restrictions, Gaylor Baird said.
And when one person or business flouts safety measures, it risks everyone’s health because of the interconnectedness of the community, she said.
“Weak links in the chain affect us all,” the mayor said.
By Chris Dunker and Riley Johnson

OWH: OPS superintendent says she made poor choice of words in comments on 'insidious' attitudes of some

The night before Omaha Public Schools Superintendent Cheryl Logan pulled the plug on in-person classes to start the school year, her frustration boiled over.
In a Zoom meeting with a South Omaha neighborhood group Thursday night, Logan blasted what she

perceived as the priorities and attitudes of other parents and community members during the coronavirus pandemic. For example, she said, she gets 25 angry calls a day about whether kids will be allowed to play football.

Logan also said some people "in the western part of this community" seemed to want OPS to close its doors to prevent the spread of the virus — so other schools could remain open and sports could continue — with little concern for how it would hurt the district's students.

"They are much more concerned with, you know, can their kids play sports, and, you know, if your kids have to stay home, so be it," she said. "It's bad. I'm telling you, I've seen the worst of humanity during this time. I've seen some good, but … I have definitely seen the worst of humanity during this time."

Logan told the Zoom audience that she knew that her comments might be construed as political but that "it's the most insidious, awful, self-serving thing I have ever been a part of," she said. "The whole notion that … of sacrificing our children's education so that others don't have to, it's just …"

On Friday, Logan announced that the district would push the start of school back a week and go to all-remote learning through October amid the rising number of COVID-19 cases in Douglas County.

In a statement later, Logan said the past five months of the pandemic have been incredibly difficult for OPS families, staff and the entire community.

"None of us wanted to be in this position," she said. "I have witnessed, up-close and personal, the emotional toll this pandemic has taken on families."

Still, she conceded that she "could and should have chosen my words more gracefully. My intent was not to offend anyone."

Superintendent Cheryl Logan's statement

"These past five months have been some of the most challenging we've ever navigated — challenging for our community, our families and for our team of devoted educators and administrators who have worked diligently to prepare for the re-opening of our schools. None of us wanted to be in this position.

"I have witnessed, up-close and personal, the emotional toll this pandemic has taken on families.

"My passion and intensity stem from the same place my drive to lead this school district to the very best of my ability does — a lifelong commitment to children, to being a voice for children and to doing what's right for children. That said, I acknowledge that I could and should have chosen my words more gracefully. My intent was not to offend anyone, but to convey my deep, personal commitment to ensuring equitable opportunities and support for all our students and for their academic and social-emotional well-being. Above all, our kids' health and safety must come first."

At least one parent objected to Logan's remarks, commenting on the video recording of the meeting posted to Facebook that she lives in west Omaha and is "completely floored and angered to be called insidious, self serving and the most awful thing she has been involved with."

"I want the best education for my child," Jennifer Dods Knight wrote. "Spring was horrible in the name of 'equity.' Although teachers and many many students had the ability to learn remotely, they didn't. They were held back. Because of that huge education hit, I want the best education for my child now."

Logan did not elaborate on what she meant by OPS students being shortchanged for the benefit of other students. At another point, she seemed to suggest that OPS was facing outside pressure to keep its students home but did not say from whom.

It's unclear if she was talking about OPS parents in west Omaha or suburban parents in neighboring school districts like Millard, Elkhorn and Westside.

Speaking before the announcement was made to push back the start of school, Logan answered questions Thursday on what the bar would be for closing school and switching to remote-only learning, about the OPS nurses who have formed contact tracing teams and about how school meals would be

handled on the days kids learned from home.
She also referred to conversations with an elected official who she said might have the initials "P.R." — presumably, Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts — who was initially unhappy with her decision to close schools in March. She also alluded to his warning to local governments that if they required people to wear masks in county buildings, they wouldn't be eligible for federal COVID-19 money. But she said that rule didn't apply to schools.
"The governor has frequently praised Dr. Logan's leadership in closing schools early in March," Taylor Gage, a spokesman for Ricketts, said Friday. "At no point has the Governor prohibited schools from requiring masks, and he supports the decisions of school boards to incorporate them into their reopening plans. … In fact, the Governor has directed his team to provide masks for OPS, which we have delivered to them."
While South Omaha has been a hot spot for coronavirus cases, Logan said Thursday that it's not just those schools that she was worried about. Lots of OPS kids live in one neighborhood but opt into a different school miles away.
Athletes testing positive seem to be clustered more in the western part of the district, she said, but "we've seen the kind of spread with our young people all over; it didn't really matter what ZIP code."
Meeting attendee Janet Bonet thanked her, saying, "Your little soapbox speech tonight really gave me hope."
Logan said the district would continue to control everything it could, but "we really need to get our kids back in school."
Asked Friday afternoon what changed in less than 24 hours, Logan said there were new warnings about rising case levels in Omaha. On top of that, a number of staff members had to be tested or quarantined because of possible COVID-19 exposures after being back for only a few days to receive training and set up their classrooms.
By Erin Duffy and Stu Pospisil

Sioux City Journal: Wayne State College trying to stay optimistic through fall sports adjustments

Even though the Wayne State College student-athletes won't be able to compete for NCAA Division II championships, Wildcats athletics director Mike Powicki believes there's some optimism in sight.
The NCAA announced earlier this week that Division II and Division III schools will not get to compete for national championships in fall sports, but schools may choose to play its regular seasons in the fall with reduced schedules.
Last week, the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference — which Wayne State competes in — announced a schedule change that pushes back the first day of practices as well as competitions.
For the sports of football and cross country, the first permissible practice will be Sept. 2 with the first date of competition scheduled for Sept. 26.
The first permissible practice for volleyball and soccer programs will be Sept. 8 with the first date of competition scheduled for Oct. 2.
The announcements throughout the last few days haven't surprised Powicki.
"We're trying to make the best decisions possible," Powicki said. "Everyone is affected. There are a lot of individuals who will try their best to look out for their safety. There's lots of information and uncertainty out there.
"We're creatures of habit to plan out the next steps and control what we can control," Powicki added. "It's been frustrating on a lot of levels. It's no one's fault."

Powicki has spent time on the phone recently, with fellow NSIC athletic directors to decide what the best steps are going forward.
Powicki and the other ADs had meetings on Thursday and Friday, and according to the Wayne State AD, the administrators will have multiple calls next week gathering information on how to further proceed. Not every question has been answered.
Powicki will also be involved on calls with the NCAA Board of Governors.
Earlier in the spring, the NCAA advised the schools some guidelines in order to keep student-athletes safe.
Some of those guidelines — which were intended as recommendations — had to do with social distancing, mask wearing and testing strategies.
On Wednesday, the NCAA Board of Governors turned those recommendations into mandates.
The NCAA asked its schools to follow federal, state and local guidelines related to COVID-19. Further, the conduct of NCAA championships must be in line with federal, state and local guidelines.
There are five states that cover the NSIC: Nebraska, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and North Dakota.
Powicki admitted that having a five-state area makes things difficult, as each state has its own regulations. He hopes to learn more about those guidelines in the weeks to come.
“There’s lots of governance, and we must be very diligent,” Powicki said.
Powicki believes that the Wildcats can succeed in terms of testing. The NCAA released some guidelines Friday about testing, which says results from tests should be obtained within 72 hours.
“We’re really fortunate to have a supportive governor (Pete Ricketts) who has been instrumental in helping our institutions and Nebraska state college system to obtain tests,” Powicki said. “We are getting tests but we don’t have them yet. There are a lot of processes but we’re making sure we have an effective strategy in turning them around.”
Powicki has spoken with first-year football coach John McMenamin several times a week throughout the pandemic. Their offseason hasn’t been what the Wildcats had wanted with bringing in a new coaching staff, but the ninth-year AD appreciated the hard work and effort McMenamin has shown.
“I feel for McMenamin, and all of our coaches,” Powicki said. “They missed out on spring football, and having to implement the new schemes, language and staff. Yes, we’re here to win games and play football, but we’re providing additional relationships. Having lost on that, of course, is a challenge. His mindset has been good.”
Powicki also feels for Scott Kneifl, the Wildcats’ volleyball coach.
The Wildcats had high expectations for the 2020 season. Wayne State went 24-7, and it bowed out of the first round of the NSIC tournament to St. Cloud State.
When Kneifl had to break the news to his team, then having to read the messages in a group chat, his heart dropped into his stomach.
“This is a huge part of their lives,” Kneifl said. “It’s just disheartening NCAA canceling the fall championships. At our level, our girls don’t just come to play, they come to play championships and to make it to those championships. Those are life events that can be cherished. Now with this obviously, it changes things, not for the better.
“If we adjust to this, and do it the right way, good things can still happen,” Kneifl said. “We’re going to adjust and do the best we can as a program.”
By Zach James

Fremont Tribune: First lady Susanne Shore, Hy-Vee present Fremont Family Coalition with donation

The Fremont Family Coalition has received $15,000 in Hy-Vee gift cards from Nebraska Impact to help with COVID-19 relief efforts.

First Lady Susanne Shore, president of Nebraska Impact, and Hy-Vee representatives presented the organization with the donation in front of the store Friday morning.

“We knew Fremont was having some struggles, just trying to help some of the citizens get those emergency supplies and food and medication,” Shore said. “So we contacted them, and this is going to hopefully help so many families get through this hard time.”

The event was also attended by Fremont Area Community Foundation Executive Director Melissa Diers and Fremont Area United Way Executive Director Christy Fiala, who is a board member for the Fremont Family Coalition.

The Fremont Family Coalition, founded in 2013, works to create community partnerships to provide resources to families. It is one of the statewide community collaboratives supported by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation’s program Bring Up Nebraska.

“With COVID, we’ve seen a huge increase in the rent and utility assistance,” said Meggie Studt, leadership member of the Fremont Family Coalition. “And so in lieu of those funds, this will help to fund school supplies and other necessities for families that are in need.”

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Studt said much of the Fremont Family Coalition’s work had to be moved online.

“But we still want to be able to supply and provide the services that we did before,” she said. “So these funds will be a huge help to a lot of different families that we serve and we’re excited to get this today.”

Originally established in 2015 to plan Nebraska’s sesquicentennial in 2017, Nebraska Impact began as Celebrating Nebraska Statehood Inc.

“When that was over, we still saw a need out there,” Shore said. “We wanted to keep promoting Nebraska and helping it get even better, help it grow.”

The nonprofit soon shifted its priorities and rebranded to build connections between communities. It provided assistance during the 2019 flooding and launched the COVID-19 Relief Fund with the Governor’s Office and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation in April.

“With Nebraska Impact, we just watched throughout 2020 the need that families are having when it comes to food security,” Shore said. “So we just watched so much need, and we contacted Hy-Vee for support, and they stepped up instantly and said, ‘What can we do to help?’”

Hy-Vee District Store Director Darin Kriech said the store always tries to give back to the communities it serves whenever it can.

“One of the main concerns during the COVID crisis here is just food security and if everybody’s going to be able to handle the needs that they have,” he said. “We’re in that industry, so it just makes sense to take care of the people that are in need.”

Kriech said along with the Nebraska Impact donation, Hy-Vee has done fundraising as a company, donating more than $1 million to local food banks.

“I know a couple of those in Lincoln and the area really benefited from that, so that’s been just a nice way to be able to give back,” he said.

Ultimately, Kriech said whenever the community needs support, those who can give should.

“There’s people in need that are doing everything they can to take care of the essential needs they have, and it just doesn’t work for everybody,” he said. “So if we’re able to give back and have that opportunity, we can support and keep our community strong and just do what we can.”

With the donation, Shore said she hopes it will help Fremonters get through times of emergency.

“It really is an emergency fund that we’ve just handed over,” she said. “And the goal is just to help

them get through until they can get to a place of stability, until everybody can get back to their jobs, they can get back to some semblance of life as normal."
Shore said Nebraska Impact just wants to see Nebraskans succeed and get better despite being hit with challenges.
"We've seen corporations like Hy-Vee step up, and foundations and other citizens," she said. "So as horrible as this is, the silver lining is that you just see how many people are willing to step up and help each other."
By Collin Spilinek

NP Telegraph: WCDHD reports 23 new cases of COVID-19, Playhouse says 24 in cast of 'Mamma Mia!' positive

UPDATE, Sunday, Aug. 9, 5:10 p.m.: Updated to reconcile two successive reports received Saturday night from the North Platte Community Playhouse.
The West Central District Health Department reported 23 new cases of COVID-19 in Lincoln County through Saturday. Eighteen of those cases were identified on Saturday, four on Friday and one on Thursday.
In addition, 24 members of the case of "Mamma Mia!" had COVID-19 as of Saturday, and Cody Park Concessions and Rides said in a Facebook post that it was shutting down "until further notice," because of possible staff exposure to the novel coronavirus.
"The most important message that we have for our community right now is to practice social distancing and wear face coverings. We will post new case information as soon as we are able," the health department wrote in the Facebook post.
There have been 144 cases of COVID-19 in Lincoln County and 155 in the six-county health district. 70 people have recovered and there have been two deaths, according to the WCDHD website.
According to Stu Shepherd, the president of the North Platte Community Playhouse's board of directors, 11 tests from the "Mamma Mia!" cast came back negative and three unknown.
Of the 38 total cast members tested, 63.2% are positive. Nine of the 24 positive cases are teenage members of the cast.
All cast and crew were tested last week after learning of the first positive case Monday. Most were tested Wednesday and received their results Saturday.
Shepherd said most of those affected have mild symptoms.

LJS: Lancaster County seeing continued declines in new cases following mask mandate, health director says

Lancaster County appears poised to post a second consecutive week of declining new COVID-19 cases, interim Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Director Pat Lopez said Friday.
The 22 new cases confirmed in the county Friday brought the total to 3,266, according to the health department. This week, there have been 167 new cases locally, or an average of 28 a day.
Lopez and Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said they see that as an encouraging indicator of the effect of the mask mandate implemented July 20.
That week, new cases peaked at 361, and health officials confirmed 310 cases the following week.
New cases among residents 20 to 29 years old have also seemed to decline recently, Lopez said.
Lancaster County isn't in the clear yet, despite these trends, Gaylor Baird said.
Health department officials have decided to keep the county's COVID-19 risk dial in the orange zone,

denoting a high risk of spread.
The mayor encouraged people to continue to socially distance when they go out, wear a mask, stay home when they're sick and minimize their trips out in the community.
"Foolish choices will only set us back," Gaylor Baird said.
Statewide, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported 283 new cases Friday, pushing the total to 28,104. There have been 345 deaths.
Next week, students across the state, including in Lincoln, will be returning to classrooms for the first time since March. And each day more and more University of Nebraska-Lincoln students are returning to Lincoln ahead of classes in the fall.
Fifteen COVID-19 patients received hospital treatment Friday in Lincoln, including eight from Lancaster County, Lopez said.
Across the state, the 156 patients reported hospitalized Friday were the most since the middle of June.
By Riley Johnson

LJS: Lancaster County reports 21 new COVID-19 cases

Lincoln reported 21 new COVID-19 cases Saturday, bringing the community total to 3,287, according to the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.
The number of deaths in the community remains at 17. There were a total of 190 cases identified in Lincoln for the week ending Saturday, which is the fewest cases in a single week since early July. The positivity rate was also down, with 6% of tests coming back positive — the lowest percentage since late June.
Interim health director Pat Lopez and Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said Friday they see the decreasing cases as an encouraging indicator of the effect of the mask mandate implemented July 20. That week, new cases peaked at 361, and health officials confirmed 310 cases the following week.
The Douglas County Health Department reported one new coronavirus-related death Saturday of a man over 65, bring the death toll in the county to 137, according to a news release from the health department.
A staff member with the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services has also tested positive for the coronavirus, bringing the total number of staff members diagnosed with COVID-19 to 49, according to NDCS. Of those, 34 have recovered.
The person is self-isolating at home, and notifications will be given to those who work in the same building as the new positive case at the agency's central office.
Statewide, there are 28,104 total cases and 345 total deaths.
By Sofia Saric

LJS: Lancaster County adds 26 new coronavirus cases

Lincoln added 26 new lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Sunday, according to the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.
The community total is now 3,313 cases.
The total number of cases reported for the week ending Saturday was 207, marking the lowest week since the week ending July 4. Cases have dropped off steeply in recent weeks following the Directive Health Measure mandating masks.
The county remains at 17 deaths.
There were 328 new cases announced statewide Sunday, bringing the total to 28,432, according to the

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. The state has had 345 deaths.
By Nick McConnell

LJS: 12 LPS staff quarantining after 3 teachers test positive

Even before the first day of school, three Lincoln Public Schools teachers working in their buildings have tested positive for COVID-19.

As a result, a total of 12 staff members at those schools — Hill Elementary, Dawes Middle School and Lincoln High — have had to quarantine, said Eric Weber, associate superintendent of human resources. The number includes the people who tested positive and those who came in close contact with them.

None of the staff members who tested positive were exposed at school, and once they started having symptoms they told supervisors, got tested and did not return to school, Weber said.

Teachers and other certified staff reported back to school Wednesday, though teachers and other staff members have been in and out of the buildings all summer for professional development. School starts Wednesday, with about 17% of students choosing to learn remotely and high school students coming back on staggered schedules.

Weber said he's pleased that the process — including contact tracing that quickly identified those with close contact — worked like it was supposed to work.

"I think one of the things we feel really good about is the process is working. We feel very good about the contact tracing with the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department," Weber said. "That is going to be important as things happen, getting to those close contacts so they don't become a danger to other people. That will be mission-critical and that has worked really well."

But three positive cases — even before thousands of students return to school — means 12 staffers can't work for about two weeks.

Even if it's unlikely the people who came in close contact with those diagnosed with the virus will get sick, having them quarantine is important, Weber said.

"We never want to have people out for any reason," Weber said. "We hate that it's five in one location and four in another, but we also understand it because it's part of making sure they're safe."

It's impossible to predict how many positive cases will happen once school starts, and having close contacts quarantine means more teachers or other staff members will be out of school.

"You just hope those numbers are low enough that they're manageable," he said.

The first positive test was at Hill Elementary on July 27, before all teachers reported back to work. Contact tracers determined five people had had close contact with the person who tested positive and were quarantined.

The other two cases happened Friday and contact tracers found that four people at Dawes had close contact with the person who tested positive. There were no close contacts with the person at Lincoln High, Weber said.

Health department officials have told LPS officials that close contact involves at least 15 minutes of contact within 6 feet. If both people are masked it wouldn't involve close contact, he said.

All those employees will be able to use two weeks of leave provided by the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which expires Dec. 31. After that, employees would have to use their annual leave. Teachers get 11 days, and can accumulate it if they don't use it.

A few other LPS staff tested positive over the summer and followed similar protocols, Weber said, and they self-isolated after testing positive.

By Margaret Reist

OWH: Nebraska prisons bar visitors again as coronavirus cases increase

LINCOLN — An uptick in COVID-19 cases has prompted the suspension of visitation and volunteer programs at the 10 state prisons.

State Corrections Director Scott Frakes called the steps "prudent" until it can be determined whether the rise in infections will continue.

As of Friday, 48 prison staff members and 10 inmates have tested positive for the coronavirus. Ten of those staffers tested positive in the past week.

"Certainly exposure in the community has contributed to the increase among staff," Frakes said. "We have been fortunate that in the majority of those instances, staff members have not had close contact with inmates."

Visits to inmates, which resumed July 15, will be suspended for at least two weeks, then the suspensions will be reviewed, Frakes said.

Halting volunteer programs, he said, would close off "another point of entry" for the coronavirus into state prisons.

Prison visits were first suspended in mid-March. Since they resumed, family members have been required to sign up and reserve a visitation time and have had to undergo a health screening before entry. Masks have been mandatory, and other steps have been taken to limit the transmission of COVID-19 to inmates.

Overall, Nebraska's prison system has fared much better than those in some other states, where testing has shown that up to 50% to 80% of inmates were infected.

By Paul Hammel

OWH: Omaha's emergency mask requirement gains support, but two council members want changes

The odds have risen that an emergency mask requirement in Omaha will go into effect next Tuesday, but two City Council members are preparing amendments that could alter the specifics, including how long the requirement would last.

Councilman Rich Pahls on Friday said he will vote for an emergency ordinance to immediately require masks in many indoor settings, joining four other council members who have said they believe a mask requirement is necessary to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

The ordinance, as written, calls for masks to be worn in many indoor public spaces, including schools, businesses, churches and while using public transportation. It includes several exceptions and would expire Oct. 12.

With Pahls' support, the seven-member council would need one more vote to approve the emergency ordinance and bypass the typical five-week process to introduce, approve and implement city laws.

The two remaining council members, Aimee Melton and Brinker Harding, say they'll introduce a handful of amendments that would shorten the length of the requirement, soften the punishment for violations and carve out some exceptions for when masks are required.

Pahls, a Republican, joins Council President Chris Jerram and Councilmen Pete Festersen, Vinny Palermo and Ben Gray, all Democrats, in supporting a mask requirement.

Melton called the proposed Oct. 12 expiration date an "absolutely ridiculous" time frame during an interview with KFAB on Friday. She told The World-Herald that she wants the ordinance to expire four weeks from Tuesday, which is Sept. 15.

She said that setup would allow the council to review Omaha's coronavirus cases in a month and

decide whether to renew the requirement.
“This is the clunkiest way to go about addressing the issue,” Harding said. “To have the council do this by ordinance, and having a sunset (date) on it, doesn’t leave any flexibility.”
Another planned amendment is aimed at not requiring schoolchildren to wear masks for an entire eight-hour school day. Harding and Melton, in separate interviews, said the idea is modeled after some school districts’ plans to allow children to go mask-free when they’re able to maintain social distance in schools.
One of the ordinance’s existing exceptions includes people working in offices where social distance can be maintained.
“That needs to be incorporated into the ordinance so that our kids get a break from wearing a mask,” Melton said.
Melton, a family law attorney, also wants to make violating the ordinance an infraction instead of a misdemeanor. She said that would prevent people from violating their probation or being kicked out of diversion for not wearing a mask.
She also wants the fine for not wearing a mask — $100 under the current ordinance — lowered to match the fine for not wearing a seatbelt, which is $25, according to the State Department of Transportation. Many public figures have compared mask requirements to seatbelt laws.
Melton and Harding both say they wear masks when appropriate and encourage people to do the same. But Melton said Friday that requiring masks is an example of government overreach. Harding said he would prefer that people voluntarily comply with public health advice.
“I also understand that there is maybe not the level of compliance that some may wish, and that’s why I’m trying to take the ordinance that was proposed and offer up some meaningful and effective amendments,” Harding said.
If those amendments don’t get sufficient support from other council members, Melton said she won’t vote for the emergency ordinance. Harding said he’s confident that the amendments will be accepted. Mayor Jean Stothert said she won’t veto a mask requirement.
During her KFAB interview, Melton noted that the federal Americans with Disabilities Act offers protections for those who can’t wear masks.
“So by the way, all of you anti-mask-wearers: If you can’t wear a mask because maybe it makes you not be able to breathe — maybe you feel that if your rights are being violated it gives you some form of anxiety — well, under the ADA, no one can force you to wear the mask,” she said.
Pahls, a former Millard Public Schools teacher, principal and administrator, said in a statement Friday that his empathy lies with parents and students who would benefit from a mask requirement.
“My ‘yes’ comes with the full understanding that this is not a 24-hour-a-day, everywhere-you-go mask requirement,” he said.
“The Omaha version of the mandate won’t be overly restrictive, and the exemptions make the ordinance a tolerable, rational policy,” Pahls said.
At an Omaha Public Schools press conference Friday, Councilman Gray said he thinks the district’s decision to offer remote learning for the first quarter of the school year strengthens the argument for a mask requirement because such a requirement could help bring students back to the classroom sooner.
But Melton, during her radio interview, said she was disappointed that OPS chose to start the year with remote learning when some have argued a mask requirement, which is now under consideration, is needed to safely reopen schools.
Said Pahls: “Many well- educated people believe a mask mandate constitutes government overreach and unwanted intervention. I understand that position, but I see a limited mask mandate as a minor

inconvenience with a possibly huge upside."
By Reece Ristau

LJS: Lincoln police enforce closure order at Madsen's

The Lincoln Police Department on Saturday morning enforced the city health department's order to close Madsen's Bowling & Billiards, blocking all entrances to the business with police cruisers and posting officers at the doors for several hours.
At about 7:55 a.m., officers arrived at Madsen's near 48th and Holdrege streets, marking the first time police have been involved in the weeklong squabbling between the local business and city over alleged violations of directed health measures.
Officers spoke with a few Madsen's employees when they arrived, then blocked off multiple driveways that lead to the building's parking lot. Owner Benjamin Madsen arrived at about 9 a.m. and spoke to police for several minutes, and the business did not open at 11 a.m. as it normally does on Saturdays.
The officers left Madsen's shortly after noon, but the business remained closed.
Later in the afternoon, Pat Lopez, interim director of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department, said in a statement that LPD will continue to enforce the closure of the establishment "until they submit a plan for operations that meets the requirements of the Directed Health Measure, which is then approved by the Health Department."
The city of Lincoln on Friday night charged the business with violating a closure order, a crime punishable by a $500 fine and six months in jail.
The charge was filed in Lancaster County Court and a court date is set for Aug. 28.
Madsen's was still open for business Friday night, seven days after the health department first ordered it closed for what the department said were flagrant violations, which included staff and customers not wearing face masks.
On Friday afternoon, Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird appeared to be trying to minimize the ongoing showdown over Madsen's refusal to close for continued violations of local coronavirus restrictions.
The mayor said she remained unconcerned over the appearance of involving police to force a business's shutdown as the fallout from the first challenge over Lancaster County's pandemic restrictions continued to unfold.
"I'm concerned about the health and safety of our community," Gaylor Baird told reporters at an afternoon news conference. "I'm concerned about keeping schools open, and I'm concerned about our economic recovery. And this conflict is small compared to what's at stake."
Madsen's attorney, J.L. Spray, reached out to the city Friday to ask what the business could do to remain open, Gaylor Baird said.
The health department then provided the business with an example of what that plan would look like, but city spokeswoman Diane Gonzolas confirmed Friday night that Madsen's had "not submitted a plan."
On Saturday, Officer Martin Fehringer said a meeting was being set up between Madsen's management and the health department to ensure compliance with the city's health measures. It was unclear as of Saturday evening whether that meeting actually happened.
"Compliance is the goal," Fehringer said.
When reached by the Journal Star on Saturday, Spray declined to comment on the situation.
Throughout the day, supporters and opponents of Madsen's cause gathered on Dudley Street to voice their opinions. A group of about a dozen supporters brought out chairs from the bar and sat in the parking lot, asking police to answer their questions about the mandate. Some conversations were

heated, but no physical altercations had occurred as of early Saturday afternoon.
Robert Borer, a former Lincoln Fire and Rescue captain, was there Saturday morning to support Madsen. He said the mayor's mask mandate unnecessarily regulates the public and hurts local businesses.
"I've been on this cause from Day One," he said. "Because (the mask mandate) is a scam."
Much of Borer's frustration was directed at Gaylor Baird, as he believes she is overreaching her authority and pitting Lincoln's citizens against one another.
"She's a not a dictator," he said. "She's a mayor."
Patrick Schauer, a community activist, said he came to Madsen's to support the mask mandate. If Madsen's was allowed to disobey the DHM, he said, it would set a precedent for other businesses to do the same.
"Is it fair for one business to call the shots and be defiant?" he asked.
Scott McCormick, who arrived when the police were there and remained after they left, said the situation became less tense as the afternoon went on.
"I was shocked when the police were here," said McCormick, who had planned to get lunch at Madsen's, which he does regularly. He said he's known the Madsens and their staff for a long time, and he supports their cause.
"The restrictions are outrageous and I want my freedom back," he said.
McCormick, who has both asthma and diabetes, said wearing a mask makes it even more difficult than normal for him to breathe.
Those gathered placed signs with messages including "Billiards Lives Matter" and "Ben's Livelihood Matters," and musician Kenneth Hall played a concert from the bed of his pickup, singing patriotic songs.
Hall, who writes original songs and parodies about his position on the issues, said the mandate was an overly aggressive measure against the virus.
"The songs are basically trying to talk about the values and principles that keep us free," he said.
Hall said he disagrees that masks slow the spread of COVID-19, and that the overreaction to the virus is causing harm.
By Alex Lantz and Nick McConnell

OWH: Will schools be able to stay open? Healthy teachers, testing could be the keys

Hundreds of thousands of Nebraska kids are slated to return to schools over the next two weeks in an ambitious attempt at restarting schools that were shuttered last spring by the pandemic.
After months of planning and fierce debate, and tens of millions of dollars spent on new technology and COVID-19-proofing schools — everything from hand-sanitizing stations to spit shields and machines that scan kids for fever — school officials will try what’s never been tried by the state’s education system.
And they will try it as some health officials caution it could result in school-based outbreaks that increase community spread or cause schools to close.
It marks an important milestone in Nebraska’s response to the disease, reflecting the governor’s philosophy that with no guarantee of a vaccine, the state has to figure out a way to move forward and manage the risk.
Some Nebraska counties have no COVID-19 cases, and their schools will open near normal without masking.
But most schoolkids, whose communities are battling the virus, will return to buildings that will look

nothing like the ones they left five months ago: masked teachers and classmates, bathroom restrictions, lunch in class or a hallway, an ocean of hand sanitizer.

How long schools can stay open will likely depend on one crucial factor: keeping teachers from quarantine.

A building can operate with substantial numbers of students in quarantine, learning remotely, but not without teachers.

For schools to stay open, teachers will have to stay healthy and avoid the close contacts with COVID-19-infected people that would force them to quarantine, leaving classrooms of kids without a teacher.

If a district's workforce of teachers and other essential personnel like bus drivers becomes depleted, and substitutes can't be found, then schools would have no choice but to shut down, send kids home and teach remotely.

"Once we lose a teacher workforce, we don't run schools," Nebraska Education Commissioner Matt Blomstedt said.

Even before the scheduled start of school in the Omaha Public Schools, the disease had begun impacting staff, Superintendent Cheryl Logan said.

That factored into Friday's decision to abandon in-person school in OPS and teach all students remotely starting Aug. 18.

Logan said that in the few days that OPS staff were back in schools preparing for the new year, critical numbers of staff had to quarantine or be tested for COVID-19.

"This allowed us to make a reasonable prediction about what school would be like when we added 54,000 students to that mix," Logan said.

Similar situations have cropped up around the country in recent weeks.

In Gwinnett, Georgia, for example, 260 employees either tested positive for the coronavirus or were in quarantine due to a possible exposure a day after the school district there started in-person pre-planning activities during the last week of July.

The challenge of keeping teachers in classrooms is exacerbated by a shortage of substitute teachers the state has been dealing with for several years. Before COVID-19, some districts were upping the pay of substitutes and offering bonuses and prizes to lure them to schools. Many substitutes are retired teachers who are more vulnerable to the ill effects of the disease, making them think twice about returning to the classroom right now.

When the Nebraska State Education Association surveyed retired educators about substitute teaching for the 2020-21 school year, just a third of those who subbed last year said they would teach again this year.

Several districts in the Omaha metro area have hired long-term subs in advance of the school year, anticipating that they will need to replace teachers who end up sick or stuck at home waiting to return from quarantine. But it's clear that a single positive case can impact multiple people around that person, even if those people don't eventually get the disease.

Keeping teachers teaching will depend on them adhering to masking, social distancing and other health protocols not only in school but outside school as well, officials said.

Beth Van Roy, a fifth grade teacher at Parkview Heights Elementary School in La Vista, said she's been taking extra precautions to protect herself and her two small children ever since schools shut down across the state last March.

For example, she said she doesn't walk into Target or Walmart but does pickup instead.

"I haven't been out to dinner or had a drink with a friend since March," Van Roy said. "Putting my own children and the students that I work with first is the priority at this point, not really to have a social life."

Students are scheduled to return to Papillion-La Vista on Tuesday.
Maddie Fennell, executive director of the Nebraska State Education Association, said that in normal times if a teacher got sick, the students in their class could be divided up and sent to other classrooms. Fennell said that when she was teaching, there were times when a colleague was out and she took over an entire class in addition to her own.
"You can't take five kids anymore and maintain social distancing in your classroom," she said.
Officials say that when cases do pop up within schools, the goal is to act quickly to prevent spread. Blomstedt said that means getting tests done and results back quickly, and tracking down who needs to be quarantined.
Blomstedt said he's concerned that a weak point could be the lack of adequate and timely testing.
According to Health and Human Services, the state has 1,002 contact tracers.
The average test turnaround time for TestNebraska labs is less than 72 hours, they said.
The recently opened testing site at Oak View Mall in Omaha has a daily capacity of 500 tests.
The state's goal is to match the 1,600 capacity of the Crossroads site, o
fficials said.
There is some rapid testing in the state, but availability is "very sporadic," officials said.
Justin Frederick, supervisor of communicable disease epidemiology at the Douglas County Health Department, said school districts have identified people who will assist the department with contact tracing for school-related cases.
The school staff members know best where students and staff are throughout the day, whether in class or extracurricular activities.
The school teams will report positive cases and close contacts to the health department through an electronic system set up for that purpose, which is intended to streamline the process.
Most often, schools will be notified by parents if a child tests positive.
The health department staff will cross-reference school reports with data it receives from testing laboratories. Department staff will be available to help determine which contacts need to be quarantined. Such situations aren't always cut and dried, and the health department has to rely on what is known about the virus.
"Our goal is to break the transmission within the schools," he said.
Frederick said his staff, which now numbers 25, will conduct all contact investigations involving minors. He's expanded his staff by hiring students and recent graduates of college health and nursing programs.
The health department also has access to contact tracers with Omaha-based health research firm PRC, which is contracted through the state health department.
Public health experts from the University of Nebraska Medical Center cautioned last month that reopening schools in a way that didn't leave room for social distancing could lead to transmission of the virus that could reach beyond school buildings into the community.
"Reopening schools at full capacity when community transmission rates are above 50 cases per million per day without multiple layers of interventions carries significant risk of school-based outbreaks that are likely to require schools to close," said John Lowe, a UNMC assistant vice chancellor for interprofessional health security training.
Last week, Douglas County was seeing about 220 cases per day per million.
Lowe said a few countries have opened successfully above the 50 cases per million per day mark. Singapore opened with reduced numbers of students at 81.3 cases per million per day, according the Back to School Playbook created by the public health college. There, however, officials knew that most of the high rates of community transmission were occurring among migrant workers in separate

housing.
Dr. Bob Rauner, a Lincoln physician and member of the Lincoln Public Schools board, said he believes Lincoln can open safely with the mitigation measures the district has in place and what appear to be recent declines in COVID-19 cases there.
Lancaster County's case rate, at about 12 new cases per 100,000 people per day, is lower than Douglas County's, which last week hovered around 22 per 100,000. In Lincoln, officials know that many infections were occurring among young people attending bars and house parties.
In addition, LPS high schools will follow a 3-2 model, reducing the number of students in buildings. The district's elementary and middle schools are less crowded, and 17% of those students have signed up for a remote learning option.
"I think we are navigating that middle ground," Rauner said.
Once school starts, UNMC plans to send a team into several school districts in the Omaha metro area to observe how well health protocols are being followed.
Team members will be looking for the ability of students to physically distance in different school environments, such as lunch rooms, gyms and locker rooms, and at the flow and movement of students through school buildings throughout the day.
They'll also make sure the objectives around mask wearing, hygiene and cleaning are being met.
It's not new territory. The team does similar checks of protocols used in the Nebraska Biocontainment Unit and the National Quarantine Unit, both on UNMC's campus.
"Once you're live and operational, there's always things you hadn't foreseen when you're writing a plan," he said.
From what they've seen so far in schools, Lowe said, lunch continues to be a challenge. Students can't wear masks while eating, so physical distancing is key.
Gretna Public Schools is slated to open Thursday with nearly all students returning. About 6% of the district's students enrolled in the district's remote-learning option.
Gretna Superintendent Rich Beran said his district will handle cases according to recommendations of the Sarpy-Cass Health Department.
"They're telling us 'You don't need to shut the whole building down if you have one or two students in a classroom,' " he said.
The principal would probably have to send everyone in that classroom home so the classroom could be cleaned, he said.
But if the students had observed protocols and weren't asked to quarantine, then they could probably just be monitored and return the next day, he said.
Beran said he told incoming new teachers that they will have to suspend the group-learning models they learned in school and use the old-school method he used back in the 1980s: standing up front lecturing.
"You've got to keep your distance from kids," he said. "You just have to think about that all the time."
While urban districts will open their doors with some staff and students already in quarantine, as of Saturday there were still eight Nebraska counties without a case.
Superintendent Dale Hafer of Ainsworth Community Schools in Brown County said his district will open nearly normal, with no masking requirement for students.
His district still had to develop a plan, just in case COVID-19 reaches his community, he said.
He said the pandemic, with no end in sight yet, is wearing on people. Starting school is always hectic, but dealing with COVID-19 on top of the usual work can occupy the whole day, he said.
He hopes the pandemic is over sooner rather than later.
"We are definitely living right in the middle of history being made," he said.

By Joe Dejka and Julie Anderson

Scottsbluff SH: Officials: Lack of space in classrooms behind virus concerns

As schools are ready to convene, Panhandle health officials explained the reasons classrooms can be a concern when it comes to spread of the coronavirus.

During Friday's call, Panhandle Public Health officials explained that the density of a classroom is smaller than other scenarios, such as a home, an office, and even a prison cell. Using an interactive chart, officials showed different levels of density, or how close to one another people can be in settings, according to illustrations shared by the Global Center for Health Security from the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Often times, as people discuss coronavirus and the spread, nursing homes are often cited as high-risk settings. However, PPHD Director Kim Engel said, classrooms are deemed the highest risk because of density.

At home, she explained, we enjoy an average of 600 square feet of space per person. Nursing homes and long-term facilities have an average of 300 feet per person. Office settings come in at 150 feet per person. According to the illustration, prison cells offer more density than a classroom. A prison cell was indicated to have a density of 60 feet per person, and classrooms came in lower, with 50 feet per person in a high school classroom and a typical elementary classroom has 35 feet per person.

"You can see, just on average, that a classroom would have less square feet per person," Engel said. "This is why so much thought has been put into coming back to school by many organizations and people," from school officials to state officials. "They want to ensure this is safe."

Engel pointed to the density estimates as the main concerns for officials in requiring masks.

Masks will also make a difference in whether or not children or staff will have to isolate or quarantine if a positive case occurs among those in the classroom.

Scotts Bluff County Health Director Paulette Schnell explained that close contacts, identified as persons having been within six feet of a person who has tested positive for the coronavirus for more than 15 minutes, are quarantined. Officials also identify contacts of a close contact, however, those persons aren't placed on quarantine. They are asked to monitor themselves for symptoms and to be aware that they should consider getting tested if they exhibit symptoms.

Schnell said, "When we talk about schools, and we are looking at a classroom and they have no other positive kids or staff, we are going to consider, if a positive case is masked, and those exposed are masked also, they would be able to self monitor and we would be actively monitoring them as public health. They would not have to miss school and be quarantined, or work, whatever the case may be. "If we had someone who tested positive in that classroom, and they do not wear a mask ... the positive person would be isolated."

Those persons in the classroom who are masked would have to quarantine, as the positive person had not been wearing a mask. Similarly, in groups, with mixed practices of wearing masks and not wearing masks, persons would have to isolate or quarantine if a positive person is not wearing a mask, she explained.

Four new cases of the coronavirus were reported Friday. PPHD has changed the way it is reporting cases during its briefings, only acknowledging that three new cases involving adults in Box Butte County, Dawes County and Sheridan counties were reported. The Box Butte and Dawes cases were identified as community spread. The case in Sheridan County involved a close contact. A Scotts Bluff County case involving a child, under the age of 19, was also reported.

A closer look at the PPHD dashboard provides some additional information, with the dashboard

indicating that the Box Butte County case involved a man in the 30-39 age range and the Sheridan County case, a man in the 20-29 age range. The demographics of the Dawes County case weren't clear on the dashboard.

The Scotts Bluff County case involving a youth occurred in the 10-19 age range and involves a boy. Scotts Bluff County is the only county that has active cases involving children. There are currently six active cases among youth.

Currently, there are 40 active cases in the Panhandle. Thirty-three of those active cases are in Scotts Bluff County. Other active cases by county: Dawes, 1; Box Butte, 1; Morrill, 1; Cheyenne, 2; Sheridan, 1; Deuel, 1.

Schnell said officials were still receiving results from tests that had been conducted Monday and Tuesday, indicating a lag in reporting. Schnell attributed the delay to efforts by TestNebraska to ramp up testing to 7,000 tests per day. While labs make changes, she said, it is slowing results on current tests.

By Maunette Loeks

OWH: OPS makes 'difficult decision' to delay start of school until Aug. 18, go fully remote

Omaha Public Schools students were four days away from being in classrooms for the first time since March.

Instead, students in the largest school district in Nebraska will start the school year remotely, a decision the district announced Friday afternoon. The start of the school year was also pushed back to Aug. 18.

"This was a difficult, difficult decision," OPS Superintendent Cheryl Logan said at a press conference. "But when our focus is health and safety, based on what we see, this is the right path forward."

The announcement comes after Dr. Deborah Birx, the coronavirus response coordinator with the White House coronavirus task force, named Omaha as one the nation's most troublesome locales for COVID-19 trends. It puts Omaha in a group of many urban school districts starting the year with remote-only learning.

While OPS students are learning remotely, all athletics and activities will be suspended.

Other districts in the metro area, such as the Millard Public Schools, still plan on welcoming students back next week for in-person classes.

In the few days that OPS staff were back in schools preparing for the new year, Logan said, critical numbers of staff had to quarantine or be tested for COVID-19.

"This allowed us to make a reasonable prediction about what school would be like when we added 54,000 students to that mix," she said.

Many school board members, teachers, parents and students had called for a remote start to the school year because they said it wasn't safe to return to school. Other parents told the school board that they were comfortable with the precautions being taken by OPS and wanted their kids back in school and sports to resume.

Last month, citing health and safety concerns, the Omaha Education Association, which represents OPS teachers, asked for a remote start.

OPS board President Marque Snow said that with 54,000 students in the district, 9,000 employees and rising COVID-19 case numbers, the board supports starting the school year remotely.

"Right now, it's the best option for us," he said. "It's going to require our community, it's going to require our teachers, it's going to require our families to all come together to make sure that our students get the best education they deserve because it's what's right."

Dr. Ali Khan, dean of the University of Nebraska Medical Center's College of Public Health, said in a tweet Friday that this is "what leadership looks like," tagging Snow and Logan. "Schools remote due to crazy bad uncontrolled transmission," he wrote. "But real kudos the students of Omaha Public Schools who demanded online."

A group of OPS students had started an online petition and website asking for a remote start to the school year, citing the risk to their teachers. As of Friday evening, the petition had received more than 2,750 signatures.

OPS sent a letter to families explaining the remote start Friday afternoon. The district will be fully remote for the first quarter, which ends in October.

School was supposed to start Tuesday. Pushing the start of school back by a week will allow teachers time to plan, and district in-service training will be offered to teachers.

During remote instruction, elementary, middle and high school students will participate in live and on-demand instruction, the letter says. The plans call for students to be online for no more than four to five hours per day. Attendance will be taken.

Middle and high school students will likely have instruction for four courses per day, and a specific daily schedule for students and staff will be provided.

Students who had signed up for the district's remote learning option will move back to their regular classes.

This spring, the school board approved the purchase of enough iPads for every student in the district and also entered into a contract with T-Mobile so students won't need Wi-Fi to use the devices.

OPS spokesman Jeremy Maskel said if the supply chain and deliveries proceed as expected, then elementary students should have iPads by or very near the start of school.

The iPad shipments for middle and high school students are scheduled for Aug. 24 and several dates in September. Maskel said the district handed out thousands of devices and hot spots to secondary students in March and will work with families who need a device this fall.

On Tuesday night, more than two dozen parents, teachers and community members showed up to the school board meeting to say that they were frustrated with how local leaders have reacted to the coronavirus and that they were uncomfortable with school starting in person next week.

In June, the district announced plans to divide students into two groups, each of which would attend school in person part of the week and learn at home for the rest of the week, in what the district called a Family 3/2 Model.

At the press conference Friday, Logan said opinions and attitudes about returning to school have changed over the summer. After the school board meeting in July, Logan said, people were very concerned about in-person learning.

The district said it would work with the Douglas County Health Department and other state and local officials to regularly evaluate health conditions in the community.

"If we are able to transition back to the Family 3/2 Model or 100% in-person learning, we will communicate that to staff and families," the district said.

At the press conference, Logan said upending the school year this close to the start of the year is not something she takes lightly.

"This is just where we are," she said. "We don't want to be here, but it is where we are."

By Emily Nitcher

OWH: UNMC to start third phase of federal COVID-19 drug trial

The Omaha-based arm of a new phase of an international drug trial testing medications for people

hospitalized with COVID-19 is expected to begin this week, a University of Nebraska Medical Center researcher said.

The third phase of the trial, which launched in February, will pair the antiviral drug remdesivir with a type of interferon used to treat multiple sclerosis and some kinds of hepatitis, said Dr. Andre Kalil, a UNMC professor and infectious diseases physician with Nebraska Medicine.

In the first phase of the trial, remdesivir was shown to shorten, by an average of four days, the time it takes for patients to recover from the illness caused by the coronavirus.

The trial, sponsored by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, part of the National Institutes of Health, enrolled its first patient at the Nebraska Medical Center.

Researchers then paired remdesivir with an anti-inflammatory drug, Kalil said. That portion of the trial closed a month ago, and researchers hope to have the results by the end of the month.

In the meantime, they're adding interferon beta-1a, which is based on a naturally occurring version of the protein produced by white blood cells as part of the body's immune system response.

Kalil said researchers chose the drug because studies indicate that people who progress to more severe COVID-19 disease have lower levels of the protein in their blood and in their lungs.

"The hypothesis we have is that because of this very tough fight between the virus and our immune system, we end up getting depleted of this very important molecule that has direct antiviral properties," he said.

By replenishing the protein and adding remdesivir, which takes aim at the virus's ability to replicate, they hope to create a synergistic effect, Kalil said.

Interferon, he said, has been used as a treatment for many years, so researchers have a good understanding of how it works and of its safety.

The researchers plan to enroll about 1,000 patients with pneumonia related to COVID-19 at nearly 100 hospitals around the world. All patients will get remdesivir, but half will get the new drug and half will get a placebo. Neither the researchers nor the participants will know who is getting which combination. The drug, according to the NIH, is marketed under the brand name Rebif by EMD Serono, a North American arm of German drugmaker Merck.

The researchers will evaluate whether the combination shortens patients' recovery time — defined as being well enough to leave the hospital — compared with that for remdesivir alone.

"The goal is just to keep going and find as many treatments as we can," Kalil said of the trial. "We want to make sure we can provide as (many) as possible while we're looking for a vaccine."

By Julie Anderson

OWH: More than 2,600 Nebraskans have signed up for expanded Medicaid so far

More than 2,600 Nebraskans applied for health coverage during the first six days of enrollment for the state's new Medicaid expansion program, officials with the Department of Health and Human Services said Friday.

As of Thursday, the department had received 2,692 applications, and more than 5,000 phone calls had been answered by Medicaid call centers from Saturday to Thursday, HHS officials said.

Benefits under the new program, also known as Heritage Health Adult, will begin Oct. 1. The program covers working-age adults whose incomes fall below 138% of the federal poverty level — $17,609 for a single person or $36,156 for a family of four.

Most will be enrolled in the basic tier of services, which include physical and behavioral health care and prescription drugs.

Those who are pregnant, age 19 or 20 or deemed medically frail will qualify for the full scope of

services available to people on traditional Medicaid, which also includes dental and vision care, as well as over-the-counter medications.
Nebraska voters approved Medicaid expansion in the 2018 general election. State officials have taken more time implementing the new coverage than any other state.
To apply, go online to accessnebraska.ne.gov, call toll-free at 855-632-7633 or TDD 402-471-7256, or go to any HHS office.
By Jessica Wade

KSNB: DHHS confirms relocation of Substance Use Disorder Program to Lincoln

HASTINGS, Neb. (KSNB) -The Department of Health and Human Services confirmed they will be relocating the Substance Use Disorder Program to Lincoln. The move was originally supposed to go hand-in-hand with the arrival of the Youth Rehabilitation Treatment Center in Hastings, but legislative action stopped the moving of the YRTC for now, but not the moving out of the SUD Program.
It has Hastings Mayor Corey Stutte worried about those employed at the Hastings Regional Center.
“Well, we obviously want to see those employees stay here in the city of Hastings, and while they maybe say that those employees will have the option to stay here, I think the jobs will be much different when you compare the YRTC to the Hastings Chemical Dependency Program, so I think that’s concerning,” said Mayor Stutte.
Local4 did reach out to the DHHS about the move, and they confirmed they plan to relocate the SUD Program to Lincoln in October. They also still plan to locate the female YRTC in Hastings starting in March.
DHHS officials also recognized improvements will need to be made to the new structures at the Hastings Regional Center to accommodate the YRTC move, which entail applying a coating over the drywall, adding film to the windows and the installation of a perimeter fence. They also acknowledged that these changes will come with an additional cost.
What it means for workers is they will have the choice to stay in Hastings and receive training for a new job or relocate to Lincoln to follow the SUD program.
The DHHS says they don’t expect any job loss with the transition, but Mayor Stutte said he still has questions about the millions in state dollars already being appropriated to Hastings to operate the SUD Program.
“Based on my discussions with the fiscal office, they said that it would not be possible and require legislative action, so I’m interested to see how the DHHS plans to do this,” Stutte said. “The building appropriations were specific to the chemical dependency program, and I look forward to hearing more about it.”
The DHHS is also working with the Missouri Youth Services Institute (MYSI), which is helping the agency focus on changing the culture with an emphasis on programming, clinical therapy and education. MYSI would also have a hand in assisting any Hastings workers who would be looking to receive training for a new position within the DHHS.
Lastly, the DHHS expressed the desire to have continued dialogue with the city of Hastings and its officials regarding these decisions. In their most recent, the DHHS says three committees were established to address community engagement, campus planning and public safety. However, the sentiment may not be mutual.
“Unfortunately, it seems they may have been acting in bad faith during these conversations, and here we are today - I found out about this second-hand, and I certainly don’t appreciate that,” Mayor Stutte said. “I certainly don’t believe that’s the way to work with communities that you are doing business in,

especially as a state agency."
By Spencer Schubert

LJS: Don Walton: Big winners emerge from grand legislative bargain

Wrong again.
No way this reporter would have bet that the Legislature would reach agreement on a new property tax reduction plan this year.
I'd have told you it couldn't get the necessary 33 votes to hurdle a filibuster.
It got 43 last Wednesday night — so, uh, maybe I was right.
One hurdle cleared, two to go.
There are some big winners here.
* Lou Ann Linehan, dogged and determined and relentless, ready and willing to change course more than once to achieve her goal of property tax relief.
* Tom Briese, whose hardball strategy of connecting the fate of new business development tax incentives to additional property tax relief worked — with a pledge of state funding support for the University of Nebraska Medical Center's pandemic-related super-project later added as another hostage.
* John Stinner, who leveraged a commitment to restore the state's rainy day fund along with some budgetary support assurances to protect future spending for state programs and services in helping negotiate an agreement.
* Jim Scheer, who brought the successful negotiating team together, scoring perhaps the biggest victory of his Speakership, which ends this year.
* Mark Kolterman, who pitched a doubleheader, patiently gathering support and then waiting out the storm to win adoption of a new business development tax incentives package and a pledge of state funding support for the University of Nebraska Medical Center's exciting, game-changing project.
And now this struggling 2020 Legislature, plagued by a pandemic and sometimes veering off into some spectacular middle school moments, is set to go home with a bang.
They'll be back in five months with some new riders ready to saddle up and begin their adventures in this one-of-a-kind, nonpartisan, one-house Legislature where everyone counts.
* * *
This week may mark Ernie Chambers' last few days in a legislative session.
Maybe, maybe not. No one should ever, ever count this man out. And even if he leaves the Legislature, he is not done.
We'll have more to say about him later in the year, but for this moment:
"I shall pass this way but once; any good that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."
Those words are better known than their author, Etienne de Grellet, an American Quaker missionary who was born in France in 1773 and later took the name of Stephen Grellet.
* * *
Chuck Hagel never, ever minces words.
"I think the president is corrupt," Nebraska's former Republican senator told the Suburban Rotary Club of Omaha a week ago in assessing Republican President Donald Trump.
"I think he is incompetent," Hagel said.
"I think he's damn dangerous, and I think this president has hurt this country in so many ways."
* * *

Finishing up:
* Yes, absolutely, of course, campaign polling results are naturally suspect, but this looks interesting: Trump, 48%; Biden, 46% in the 1st Congressional District in results of a survey of 400 likely voters shared by the Kate Bolz congressional campaign. Biden with a big 15-point lead in Lancaster County, fueled by Lincoln.
* First-week applications for participation in Nebraska's Medicaid expansion program: 2,692. Maybe 90,000 to go.
* Daily Test Nebraska COVID-19 testing numbers jumped from 601 on July 1 to 3,010 on July 31.
* The American Immigration Council reports 2,910 DACA individuals in Nebraska as of 2019.
* Jim Vokal of the Platte Institute described last week's grand bargain in the Legislature as "a product of having an executive who has blocked any good options for raising revenue and local political subdivisions that didn't want to agree to an exchange of state funding for additional limitations on their taxing authority."
* Not voting on the 43-2 vote that moved the big package forward last week: Sens. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha, Steve Erdman of Bayard, Mike Groene of North Platte and Justin Wayne of Omaha.
* Community spread of the virus is inevitable once public schools resume classes and University of Nebraska students return to Lincoln, but it will help if all of us do the easy, simple, unselfish, little gesture of wearing a face mask. How hard is that?
By Don Walton

OWH: What to watch for as a Nebraska legislative session like no other ends

LINCOLN — State lawmakers have three days left in a rough-and-tumble 2020 session, and expect some heavy lifting, more venting of frustrations, and maybe a couple of surprises. In a lot of ways, this year's suspended-and-then-resumed 60-day session has been a lot like the mythical holiday of Festivus created on the show "Seinfeld" — a lot of airing of grievances, and some feats of strength.
The grievances? Too much partisanship, too many procedural motions to frustrate debate, and too much grumping about grudges and slights in the nonpartisan unicameral legislature.
The feats of strength? Pushing a compromise property tax relief/business incentive bill, as well as a bill banning a type of second-trimester abortion, toward passage in the waning days of the session, after it appeared that both would be blocked.
The big compromise came after State Sen. Jim Scheer of Norfolk, the speaker of the Legislature, convened a "super seven" group of legislators. That group finally abandoned a bill that would have revamped the distribution of state aid for K-12 schools — one blocked by education groups — for a different, and more modest, plan that has more than enough support. It would provide $125 million to property taxpayers via a state income tax credit fund next year, ramping up eventually to $375 million. That's not a lot of relief — maybe only 6% less on your property tax bill for local schools — but it's a surprising reversal from the year ago, when nothing got done in addressing the state's perennial problem of high property taxes.
"I think there was a recognition that we couldn't fail, that we had to put something together," said Sen. John Stinner of Gering, one of the architects of the compromise.
Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, another of the seven, credited Scheer for "keeping us in a room until we got an agreement."
"No one's particularly happy, but everyone's going home with something," Linehan said.
The deal included an update of the state's tax incentives program for growing businesses, called the

ImagiNE Act, and a pledge to come up with $300 million in state money for the NExT project at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, provided the project also gets commitments of $1.3 billion in federal and private dollars. The project has been billed as a "game changer" for Omaha and the state, one that will create a national center for response to pandemics, natural disasters and bioterrorism. More than 8,000 permanent jobs, paying upward of $70,000 a year, would be created.

"The timing is right to go to the Department of Defense and FEMA and say, 'We've got this public-private partnership, we're in the middle of the county' " and build that response center in Nebraska, Stinner said.

The state's current program of tax incentives for businesses, the Advantage Act, expires at the end of the year, and Linehan said the state cannot be left without such a program to encourage job growth and business investment.

Some things to watch in the final three days:

Abortion bill

Can supporters of the bill banning dilation and evacuation abortions, called dismemberment abortions by opponents, stay united? Legislative Bill 814 lacked the needed 33 votes to head off a filibuster when it first came up this session, but got the support of 34 senators to send it to second-round debate on Tuesday.

Abortion opponents, led by Sen. Suzanne Geist of Lincoln, say the abortion method is an inhumane and barbaric procedure that should be banned. Those fighting LB 814 say that similar laws have been ruled unconstitutional in other states, and the only thing that will be accomplished if the bill is passed is an expensive legal battle. Passage of LB 814 would be a show of strength for the anti-abortion movement.

Frenetic final days

There's always some craziness in the final couple of days of a session, as senators scramble to find last-minute ways to get bills passed that might not already be on the final rounds of consideration.

We've already seen Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha file a rare motion to side-step three rounds of debate on his bill to provide incentives for business growth in low-income areas. And Omaha colleague Sen. Tony Vargas is seeking a way to get his proposal to improve worker safety in packinghouses — which hasn't been advanced from committee yet — passed this session.

Meltdown or 'kumbaya'?

Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, the Jedi master of the rules, is still in the Legislature, and he has bottled up the process at the end before, blocking bills he dislikes from passage.

He has only three days left on the floor of the Legislature, where his speeches, scolding and poetry are legendary (he's term-limited from running for reelection for the second time after more than four decades in the Legislature). Will he play nice? Or go out roaring like the mountain lions he works to protect?

Will there be vetoes?

Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks of Lincoln pointed out that the failure to have final approval on several bills on Thursday delays that action to Tuesday — and that leaves the measures vulnerable to a veto by the governor without giving the Legislature a chance to override them.

Once a bill gets the Legislature's final approval, the governor has five days to decide whether to sign or veto a bill, or let it become law without his signature. That means that state lawmakers will be long gone, and home, by the time he renders a final decision on some measures, leaving senators no opportunity to override any vetoes. A bill allowing smaller cities to use land banks, a means to redevelop dilapidated lots and homes, is seen as vulnerable, as well as a measure expanding the ban on racial discrimination to include a person's hair texture or style.

By Paul Hammel

LJS: Tax package protects current state programs, according to Appropriations chair

It's all doable without endangering adequate funding for ongoing state programs, services and commitments.

That's the assurance from Sen. John Stinner of Gering, chairman of the Legislature's Appropriations Committee, the guy with all the facts and figures and projections at his fingertips.

Stinner sat down in his first-floor office at the Capitol the morning after the Legislature's bombshell action propelled a huge, grand bargain agreement centered on increased property tax relief ahead toward almost certain passage.

A state-funded $125 million property tax relief proposal — scheduled to rise to $375 million in the fifth year — was accompanied by a $300 million pledge of state funding for an ambitious $2.6 billion development at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, along with incremental funding for a new business development tax incentive program that could cost $150 million in its fifth year.

Big change, big investment, big breakthrough.

But what about funding for ongoing state programs and services, along with the new financial commitment to fund expanded Medicaid services for an estimated 90,000 Nebraskans?

"It's doable," Stinner said.

"We do not want property tax relief funded with cuts in spending."

So the package comes with built-in safeguards, he said, and is tied to the expectation of annual revenue growth.

Increasing property tax relief — delivered in the form of refundable state income tax credits for school property taxes paid — would be coupled to increases in state revenue.

Stinner also insisted on provisions that would restore the state's cash reserve, which senators refer to as the rainy day fund.

"That's your crutch," he said. "That's what you lean on."

A provision in the property tax portion of the bill provides that if growth in state tax receipts exceeds 3.5% and the state's cash reserve contains at least $500 million, half of the excess revenue would be allocated to the new property tax credit fund.

That 3.5% requirement "protects state government," Stinner said.

"And safeguards provide that we would not fund additional property tax relief until we replenish the rainy day fund," he said.

Looking ahead, it's clear that Stinner is open to a couple of potential new sources of revenue: a broadened state sales tax base that includes "pushing away" some exemptions on services and the possibility of legalizing casino gambling in order to capture revenue that now flows out of Nebraska and into bordering states.

It's not only Omaha residents and other Nebraskans who cross the Missouri River to gamble at casinos in Iowa, he said. Busloads of Nebraskans leave the Panhandle to gamble at casinos in South Dakota and Colorado, Stinner said.

"Let's reform the sales tax or at least take a hard look," he said, pointing to a wide array of exemptions for services that could be tapped for revenue.

"That needs to be looked at," he said. "A broader sales tax base could also mean a lower rate."

Revenue is needed to fund state appropriations and there are also new challenges looming ahead:

"The prison population situation needs to be taken care of," Stinner said.

Stinner was one of seven senators who helped craft the final compromise that emerged from negotiations launched by Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk in an attempt to seek agreement on a plan in

the fading days of this legislative session.
The odds stood sharply against reaching any kind of substantial agreement, and the committee was "about ready to break up and walk away" at one point, Stinner said.
Stinner gives credit to Revenue Committee Chairwoman Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn for not allowing that to happen — "she was totally invested in this and insisted that we agree on a plan" — along with Scheer for his leadership in shaping the informal committee, which huddled behind closed doors.
"It was pretty intense," Stinner said. "People were passionate and I kind of like that.
"At the end of the day, we all kind of huddled up for the good of the state. We decided failure is not an option. The time to act is right now."
During negotiations, Stinner insisted on replenishing the state's cash reserve.
The property tax component of the agreement begins with relief for about 6% of local school property taxes paid, rising to an estimated 18% in the fifth year.
The 43-2 vote to advance the bill Wednesday night was stunningly lopsided, with only Sens. Ernie Chambers and Megan Hunt, both of Omaha, voting no.
Second-stage floor consideration of the proposal (LB1107) is scheduled when the Legislature returns to action Tuesday, with the measure listed as the first item on the agenda.
The coronavirus-interrupted 2020 legislative session will adjourn Thursday.
By Don Walton

LJS: Sara Howard leaving the Legislature a changed woman

Sara Howard stepped into her lawmaking role at age 31, a shy, wide-eyed woman who rarely stood to speak during debate, unless it was to nicely explain one of her bills.
She lacked confidence, she says now, and certainly wasn't assertive.
But because of her demeanor, she jokes, her fellow senators seemingly would no more vote against a Howard bill than kick a basket of puppies.
A lot has changed, she said last week, but quickly added: "I'm still nice."
Howard followed her mother to the state Capitol in 2013, after Gwen Howard spent eight years representing Omaha's District 9. The younger Howard came with a degree from Smith College in Massachusetts, a doctor of jurisprudence from Loyola University of Chicago School of Law, and experience as a staff attorney for the Illinois Maternal and Child Health Coalition.
No basket of puppies there.
Once, when a senator plopped the thousands of pages of the Affordable Care Act on his desk and proclaimed no one had or could have read it, she answered: I did, several times.
Now, Howard has two terms as Nebraska state senator on her resume, and even though she is comfortably hitting her stride, state law says it's time for her and five other term-limited senators to go.
Who is leaving?
The six term-limited senators are: Lincoln Sen. Kate Bolz, Omaha Sen. Ernie Chambers, Speaker Jim Scheer of Norfolk, Sen. Sara Howard of Omaha, Sen. Sue Crawford of Bellevue, Omaha Sen. Rick Kolowski.
Fellow senators Megan Hunt and Patty Pansing Brooks say they'll miss her leadership on the Health and Human Services Committee and the floor of the Legislature, and her significant knowledge, steadfast commitment to her values and mentorship.
"She's done admirable work to try to train new senators to protect and sustain the value of our unicameral (Legislature)," Hunt said. "I have admired her measured, thoughtful, compassionate

leadership style for years."
Howard is known as one of the best at the legislative process in recent memory. Great vote counter and a top-grade manager of the debate, knowing who should speak and when, and how to get the vote where it needs to go.
"When she was a freshman, she was the best floor manager I ever had," said former Lincoln Sen. Kathy Campbell. "She knew how to talk to senators. She knew how to answer questions, get information for them. That's a skill that not everybody has, and she came with it."
Her first term was a great learning experience, Howard said, and she was reelected in 2016, ready to take over for Campbell and lead the Health and Human Services Committee.
Then 2017 happened.
It was described as a coup d'etat, as hugger-muggery. On the first day of the session, Republicans carried out a surprising, painful-to-some, election of committee chairs and leadership, ousting some Democrats and moderate Republicans and replacing them with conservatives and first-year senators. Howard was among the collateral damage, losing the HHS chairmanship on a 27-22 vote.
Then, senators spent 30 days of the session fighting over rules.
"I think something really shifted in 2017 for me," she said. "That was awful. But it forced me to grow in a way that's been really important."
Howard realized, she said, that the institution of the unicameral Legislature was "quite fragile, and if I keep looking at it in this beautiful, naive way I wasn't going to be able to preserve it." And she certainly didn't want to leave it worse off than she had found it when she arrived.
The ship was righted when she was elected chairwoman of the committee in 2019, and she describes these last two years as "halcyon days," with senators having conversations about caring for the institution and its integrity. More people are paying attention, she said.
And Howard, still one to speak sparingly and measure her words, has become known as one of those to listen to on the floor, one who can calmly break down a tough subject and explain it so most folks can understand.
Votes don't really come from speeches on the mic, she said, but more from sitting down with someone — face-to-face — to make sure they understand what's in a bill and why it's important.
Because of this job, she said, she will be able to take a calmness into nearly any other field.
"It gives you a certain perspective on any other type of work that you're doing because we were making life-and-death decisions, we were impacting families, we were changing the face of our state in a lot of ways," she said.
Lots of stress, she said, but also lots of reward.
Howard was the leader on the series of bills that last week were signed into law that will provide oversight of the state Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers. That's the role of the legislative branch, she said.
"It's the first time in four years that we've asserted our authority as a co-equal branch, which shouldn't be hard and shouldn't be remarkable," she said. "But in this environment, it really is."
Her work on opioids and drug monitoring — continuing the work her mother started — has been most important to her, because of her sister Carrie's death from an opioid overdose.
Through it all, she said, it has been satisfying to work in the Legislature, in a job in which she could affect so many people, a job that was bigger than one young woman from midtown Omaha.
"I feel very confident to say that I'm very good at this job. And that's the shame of term limits," she said.
Is the Legislature a good place for women?
"It can be," she said.

But anyone coming here has to recognize it will be their own hard work that makes things happen, that creates whatever degree of satisfaction is generated. Their own steam, nothing else, she said.
It's up to each person, she said, to build a healthy environment, demand the respect she deserves, create the expertise and credibility that she can, and build the relationships needed to be strategically successful.
"If you care about the work, if you care about the institution, it will break your heart sometimes," she said.
Howard went through a health crisis in her first term in which she had a seizure in her office and had to be taken to a hospital. She had another one at home the next night. The only thing the doctors could tell her was that stress, lack of sleep and working too many jobs must have been the cause, and she needed to make some changes.
She and other women there have talked about experiences at the Capitol with men casually touching them in ways that made them uncomfortable. For herself, she said, she has been good at shutting that down, making those men uncomfortable enough so that they never do it again.
"I'm very good about healthy boundaries now in a way that I probably wasn't when I started," she said.
As she leaves the Legislature, Howard is not planning to leave public service. She is running for the Omaha Public Power District Board in November.
"I am excited to dig into something that will not break my heart," she said. "Sincerely, let's talk about energy, let's talk about sustainability, let's talk about coal plants. ... If term limits is forcing me into a change of pace, then I'm going to lean into it hard."
But Howard doesn't hesitate to say she would consider coming back.
"I don't know if I'll miss it in the same way that other people miss it. I've never been comfortable with the title. I've never been comfortable with all the attention. But I've always loved the work."
By JoAnne Young

OWH: 'Once-in-a-lifetime lawmaker' Ernie Chambers winds down historic career in Nebraska Legislature

LINCOLN — The most famous Black man in Nebraska and one of the state's most influential figures will put yet another mark in the history books this week.
Eight years ago, State Sen. Ernie Chambers became the first state senator to return to the Legislature after being term-limited out. Now he will become the first to be term-limited twice.
He already holds the record as Nebraska's longest-serving lawmaker, having represented North Omaha for 46 years. That's more than half the years that Nebraska has had a one-house legislature and more than half his own life.
"I am the Alpha and the Omega of this Legislature," he said during a recent debate.
Over those 46 years, Chambers has had a hand in innumerable pieces of legislation. He has stood up for the "least, the last and the lost," whether Black or not. He has been a thorn in the side of opponents and has demanded high standards from public officials. And he continues to inspire generations of Nebraskans to pursue racial justice and equity.
LaVon Stennis-Williams, a North Omaha native who counts Chambers as a friend, said Nebraska has been fortunate to have Chambers in the Legislature, and his departure will leave a void.
"I think sometimes Nebraska does not understand the power and influence of this man," she said. "He just has a heart for helping uplift people."
Former State Sen. Tanya Cook of Omaha called him "an iconic figure," while former Sen. Brad Ashford of Omaha described him as a teacher and mentor. Even those who have found themselves at odds

with Chambers respect him.
“He’s a once-in-a-lifetime lawmaker,” said Chris Rodgers, a Douglas County Board member who represents North Omaha. “No matter what you think, you have to respect his skill in a deliberative body.”
Chambers arrived in the Legislature at age 33, a barber whose notoriety as a civil rights activist preceded him. For most of his career, he has been the only non-white senator in the Legislature.
He stood out in other ways, too, from wearing short-sleeved sweatshirts and jeans every day to taking up issues others feared to touch.
Much of Chambers’ effectiveness comes from his willingness to follow his conscience, come what may. He said he honed a strong sense of personal responsibility during his churchgoing youth. He has cast off religion since, but not the commitment to doing what he believes he ought to do for no other reward than his own peace of mind.
“I know I’m the most feared and most hated man in this state,” he said. “I know that and it doesn’t mean anything to me because my life is not based on whether people approve of what I do or agree with what I do.”
In other moments, he quotes the mantra of Popeye the Sailor Man: “I yam what I yam.”
Chambers multiplied his power as a single senator by becoming the undisputed master of legislative rules, particularly the filibuster. He put pressure on other senators by taking up time or threatening to do so.
He often used those extended debates to educate, infuriate and entertain. He provided lessons about history, especially the history of slavery, and pointed lectures about what he sees as the failings of white people generally and public officials in particular. He also told fractured Bible stories and tales from Western movies, interspersed with snippets of song.
Five years ago, Chambers succeeded at one of his career goals, repealing Nebraska’s death penalty. Conservative senators joined him to pass a repeal bill and override Gov. Pete Ricketts’ veto.
But Nebraska voters reinstated capital punishment the following year, after the governor financed a referendum petition to put the issue on the ballot. Despite Chambers’ legal efforts, the state executed Carey Dean Moore through lethal injection two years later, the first execution in 21 years.
“Getting the death penalty abolished, even though it was temporary, meant a great deal to me,” Chambers said.
He had more lasting success with legislation barring the execution of people convicted as juveniles and people with mental retardation.
Another lasting accomplishment was the passage of laws requiring district elections for the Omaha school board, Omaha City Council and Douglas County Board.
That change allowed Black people, and later Latinos, to be elected to those bodies for the first time ever and gave a voice to a broader range of Omaha neighborhoods. Some of those elected to those local boards have gone on to higher office, including two of Chambers’ current legislative colleagues, Sens. Justin Wayne and Tony Vargas.
Chambers’ work reached across the world in 1980, when he pushed for a resolution that made Nebraska the first state to divest from businesses operating in apartheid South Africa. Omaha City Council member Ben Gray said the resolution started a domino effect that eventually pressured that country to do away with its system of state-imposed racial segregation and discrimination.
Another law led to freedom and exoneration for six people convicted in a Beatrice woman’s rape and slaying. The Beatrice Six collectively spent more than 70 years in prison. The law requires the state to test DNA evidence if it was unavailable at the time of a trial and could exonerate a defendant.
Other laws banned corporal punishment in the public schools, eliminated the sales tax on groceries,

required grand jury investigations of the deaths of people while in police custody, and established government liability for bystanders injured in police chases.

Chambers played a key role in creating the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, which forced Omaha-area school districts to work together on addressing needs of students in poverty, and he got a portion of the sales tax used to help finance the CHI Health Center earmarked for historical preservation and anti-gang violence initiatives in North and South Omaha.

He also fought to protect college athletes from having their scholarships yanked after an injury and to allow them to be paid. He got the same retirement benefits for female state employees as males and introduced some of the first legislation to bar job discrimination against people on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

His last bill was signed into law Thursday. Chambers called it a “pee wee” measure compared with some he has proposed. It will require law enforcement officers to get two hours of anti-bias and implicit bias training every year. The requirement aims to reduce racial profiling and curb police violence against Black people.

As important as the legislation he has gotten passed, however, have been the bills he stopped or slowed.

He has held numerous abortion restrictions at bay, along with attempts to replace the electric chair with lethal injection. The switch was passed only after he was termed out of the Legislature the first time. He regularly fights proposals to raise sales taxes and fees on ordinary people.

He was the lone “no” vote in 1997 when Nebraska passed a law banning a late-term abortion procedure. Yet his objections in the legislative record helped build a case that led to the U.S. Supreme Court overturning the law.

Chambers has had a hand in many more pieces of legislation, Cook said. Behind the scenes, she said, he frequently offered to help colleagues fix flaws in their bills.

“He has a lot of influence because he cares so much about the integrity of the institution,” she said.

That respect, both for the Legislature and for the judiciary, shows up in his frequent criticisms of those who fall short. He has filed numerous complaints alleging ethical failings of judges and pushed for investigations of wrongdoing by public officials.

Chambers has come in for his share of criticism.

Some argue he should have done more for economic development of his district, which has the highest percentage of families in poverty in the state. But Cook noted that those complaints are not coming from his constituents, who have repeatedly reelected him. Others focus on things Chambers has said in debate. Nearly every year he has provoked outrage and condemnation for comments that others have called “irresponsible,” “appalling,” “offensive” and “horrifying.” Some comments have been labeled sexist or anti-Semitic.

Most recently, Chambers criticized State Sen. Julie Slama and Ricketts for a campaign mailer that former Gov. Dave Heineman and Bob Kerrey, a former governor and U.S. senator, have called racist. The mailer juxtaposed a photo of Slama’s opponent, Janet Palmtag of Nebraska City, with a photo of Chambers.

He said the ad was an attempt to scare voters in District 1 into voting for Slama, and he called it dirty politics. He then said that if Slama wanted to engage in dirty politics, she should not be surprised if people repeat rumors about why Slama, whom he called a young woman with little life experience, was appointed by Ricketts.

Other recent controversies include a comment Chambers made during a 2015 hearing about a bill to loosen concealed carry laws. When the bill introducer said people needed to have guns in bars because of the Islamic State and “the world situation,” Chambers responded that residents of his district were

more in fear of police than of extremist groups.
“My ISIS is the police. Nobody from ISIS ever terrorized us as a people as the police do us daily. And they get away with it,” he said.
And last year, he drew condemnation for calling the American flag a “rag” during debate about a civics education bill that required students to learn respect for the flag, among other things.
“Every hateful thing that was done to Black people was done under the aegis of that rag,” he said, adding, “You’re more upset by what’s said about that rag than about the savaging of the Constitution.”
Chambers dismisses the criticism.
“I genuinely don’t care what people think of me,” he said. “ I don’t care what they say about me. It’s just words. My self-respect is intact, my pride is intact and those things that make me what I am when it comes to my own estimation are all intact, untouched by them.”
He’s equally unperturbed by having to leave the Legislature, calling it “just another bump in the road.”
Chambers hasn’t decided what comes next. A group of supporters has been pushing for him to run for Douglas County Board this fall. He agreed to do it if they collect enough petition signatures to put his name on the ballot. He would need to file for the seat by Sept. 1.
And in four years, when he could run for the Legislature again? He won’t rule out the idea, even though he would turn 87 before the November 2024 election. He said he would consider returning if “my mind is clear and my health is good.”
After all, there will still be inequities to tackle and people who still need someone to speak out for them.
“That may put on me a responsibility to live four more years and come back,” he said.
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Meet Ernie Chambers: Outside of the Nebraska Legislature, he lives a simple life

LINCOLN — Outside of the Legislature, Ernie Chambers feeds squirrels in his yard, shovels snow for neighbors and lives a simple life.
A North Omaha native, he was born July 10, 1937, as one of seven children of Malcolm and Lillian Chambers. His father was a minister who worked at the Armour Packing Co. His mother cleaned houses. They set high standards for their children, and Chambers grew up going to church, where he developed a strong sense of right and wrong.
He graduated from Omaha Technical High School in 1955, where he was an indifferent student. But he was an honors student at Creighton University, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in 1959, and at Creighton law school, which he attended in the 1960s. He completed his law degree in 1979.
Even in high school, he said, people turned to him for help because he was not afraid to talk back to white people. By 1961, his outspokenness and his views on race caught the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which began a decade-long investigation of him.
While in law school, he worked as a distribution clerk at the Omaha Post Office. He was fired in 1963. Postal officials alleged insubordination, he said he had complained about a white supervisor who had called him “boy.” He made The World-Herald shortly afterward for single-handedly picketing a testimonial dinner for the postmaster.
Chambers served in the U.S. Army during the 1960s and later became a barber. The Spencer Street Barber Shop, where he worked, became a gathering place. He got married along the way and he and his wife, Jacklyn, had four children and six grandchildren. The couple divorced in the 1970s and she died in 2000.
Chambers lives in a modest home and maintains strong connections with his North Omaha community.

He can be counted on to help constituents, whether it means helping pay for a headstone or mowing a lawn. Recently, he donated to an effort to make masks for public housing residents.
By Martha Stoddard

OWH: Facts and figures from Ernie Chambers' time in Nebraska Legislature

Below are some facts and figures from Ernie Chambers' career in the Nebraska Legislature.
* * *
In short
» First elected in 1970.
» Won reelection 11 times in total, including a write-in candidacy in 1988 when he made a simultaneous bid for U.S. Senate.
» Left the Legislature in 2009 when he was term limited.
» Returned to the Legislature in 2013 after sitting out one term.
» Longest-serving Nebraska state senator.
Among his accomplishments
Wrote laws that:
» Instituted district elections to foster black representation on the Omaha City Council, the Douglas County Board and the Omaha school board.
» Banned corporal punishment in Nebraska schools.
» Eliminated the sales tax on groceries.
» Required grand jury investigations of deaths of people in law enforcement custody.
» Established government liability for innocent bystanders injured in police chases.
» Narrowed capital punishment's application with bills barring execution of juveniles and those with mental disabilities.
Demanded investigations of alleged wrongdoing, including:
» Mock lynching of a Black Nebraska National Guardsman in 1976.
» 1984 shooting death of Cairo, Nebraska, farmer Arthur Kirk in a State Patrol standoff.
» Allegations about the business dealings of former Attorney General Paul Douglas with the failed Commonwealth Savings Co. that led to Douglas' impeachment in 1983.
» Sexual misconduct allegations arising after the 1988 failure of Franklin Community Credit Union in Omaha.
» Campaign finance violations that led to the 2006 impeachment and removal of NU regent David Hergert.
» Use of legislative computers for cybersex that led to the 2017 resignation of Sen. Bill Kintner of Papillion.

OWH: Check out the poems from State Sen. Chambers' Ernie Grams

Omaha State Sen. Ernie Chambers often includes poems in his Ernie Grams, photocopied missives regularly distributed to legislative colleagues and others. Some poems are brief, some fill multiple pages; some are light-hearted, some more serious in tone and tenor. Below are a few examples; the underlining is Chambers'.
* * *
DEFINITION: "Ricketts' Crickets"
Senators who, for Ricketts are made for,

Belong to him, being bought and paid for.
To Crickets, cash he does disburse
Because he holds the strings to the Purse.
* * *
THE REVOLVING CIRCLE OF HISTORY
“You shall be the death of me!”
The Teacher told the little Boy;
“You’ve not done your History;
“Just once, I wish you’d bring me joy
“By doing your Assignment
“As the other Students do.
“Since I have you on Consignment,
“I am forced to deal with you.
“Yesterday I emphasized
“How necessary is this work,
“Thinking every Student realized
“How bad it is to shirk.
“But no word can you repeat
”Of History, you naughty Elf!”
“There’s no need!” (His tone was sweet.)
“For History does repeat itself!”
* * *
In the Realm of Legislating, one encounters various “schools.”
Herewith, I disclose my Methodology for “Working the Rules”:
Sometimes a pittance
Of Passive Resistence
Known as insistence,
Goes the distance.

OWH: NU system struggles with recruitment and retention of Black and Hispanic professors

Kent Blansett says he loved his students, liked the University of Nebraska at Omaha, enjoyed the city and wasn’t eager to leave.
But this year, the University of Kansas made a pitch to the Native American professor at UNO. KU wanted to strengthen its Indigenous studies program, Blansett said, and saw him as a good recruit. Two years ago, Yale University Press published his book on Richard Oakes, the leader of the American Indian occupation of Alcatraz 50 years ago.
UNO failed to match KU’s offer, Blansett said last month, so this summer he moved to Lawrence, Kansas. In the process, UNO also lost to KU Blansett’s western history professor wife, Elaine Nelson, who is white.
Blansett said of UNO: “There was no retention package that was made to me. There was nothing done.” David Boocker, UNO’s dean of arts and sciences, responded to a reporter’s email by saying that “contract negotiations are considered personnel matters.”
Blansett’s case illustrates the competitive nature of recruiting and retaining minority faculty members, including Blacks and Hispanics. Higher education has been especially vocal over the past few weeks

about the urgency to improve race relations in America. The death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police provoked protests by Blacks and whites throughout the nation.

A key measure of campus commitment to racial diversity is the number of minority faculty members and minority students at the institution. At places like UNO, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of Nebraska at Kearney, numbers of Black and Hispanic professors have not grown as rapidly as numbers of Black and Hispanic students, and in some cases have not grown at all.

Edna Chun, a higher education diversity consultant in Florida, said isolation in geography in more rural America works against some colleges. But Chun said want-to is a key element in recruiting minorities. Networking nationally, crafting the job description so that it isn't extremely narrow, recruiting aggressively and showing concern for how already hired minority professors are doing — all are important elements.

"My theory is: They're out there, you just have to look," Chun said of minority scholars. "I don't think it's only a matter of money. ... It's also how you go about it."

Gwendolyn Combs, UNL's director for faculty diversity and inclusion, said it helps to have a "critical mass" of minority faculty members and students. Then a minority job candidate or prospective student can envision himself fitting in on the campus.

But one person's critical mass is not the same as another's, Combs said.

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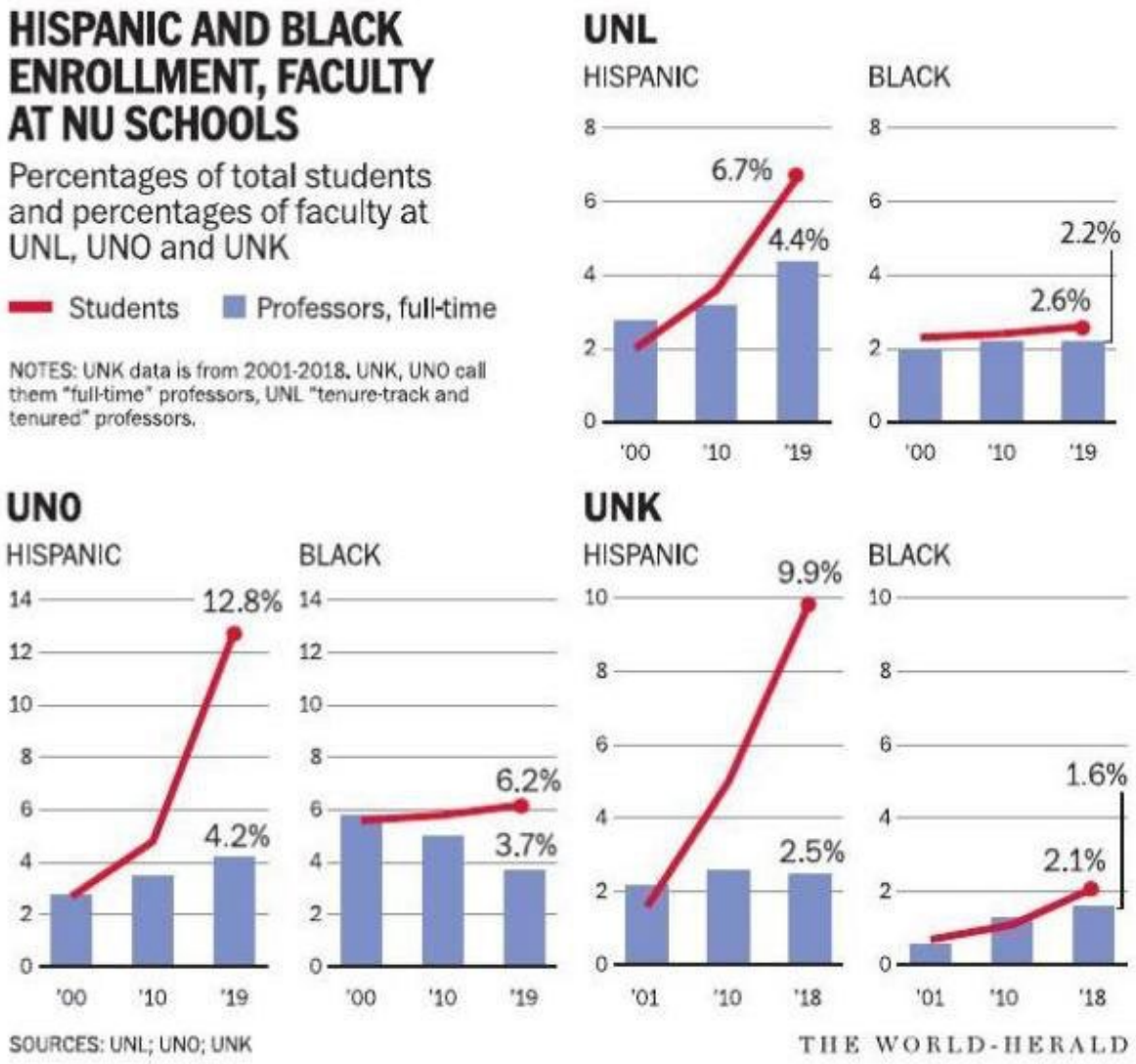

Numbers of minority doctorate recipients are rising. Federal statistics show that Hispanic holders of doctoral degrees more than doubled between 2000-01 and 2016-17, rising from 5,204 to 12,493. Black doctorate recipients doubled from 7,035 to 14,067, while Native American numbers remain low, growing from 705 to 746.

Administrators throughout the NU system say their commitment to hiring "underserved" minority faculty members is genuine. Results are sometimes hard to show because other schools want such professors, they say. Further, the state of Nebraska doesn't have the appeal for some minority faculty members that states rich in minorities, like Michigan and Texas, can provide.

"It's a work in progress," said Sacha Kopp, UNO's senior vice chancellor for academic affairs. But Kopp said UNO has taken important steps.

Kopp said faculty members and administrators have revamped UNO's recruitment guidelines over the past year. Among many things, the guidelines say efforts to hire new professors should include networking with historically Black colleges and colleges with high Hispanic enrollments.

The guidelines encourage UNO deans and department chairmen to be connected to national pipelines of scholars by academic discipline.

UNL Chancellor Ronnie Green has emphasized the need for soul-searching, to acknowledge racial biases and take action, such as improving the recruitment and retention of minority faculty members. At UNL, the number of Black full-time tenured and tenure-track professors has remained flat over 20 years, with 22 in 2000 and 24 last year.

"I want to understand, why is that the case?" Green said in a recent interview. He said pledges of improvement have come and gone over the years. This time, he said, "It really has to be different."

Marco Barker, UNL's vice chancellor for diversity and inclusion, said his hiring (UNL's first in that position, created last year) indicates that UNL wants to make progress. "I absolutely believe there's a real commitment" to improving race relations on campus, he said.

Nebraska census information indicates that there should be solid growth in minority enrollments. Hispanics in the state have more than doubled since 2000 to an estimated 219,645 in 2019, or about 11.4% of the population. Blacks have risen 40% to an estimated 94,830 last year, or 4.9% of the population.

The census data was compiled by the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research.

At UNO, the number of Black faculty members fell from 27 to 22 from 2000-2019, while Black students increased over that time from 755 to 936. And at UNK, numbers of Hispanic students have increased six-fold while, as of 2018, Hispanic professors had increased by one since 2001.

Kopp said UNO has increased a faculty development program in which some faculty are hired before they complete their doctoral programs. The program is designed to bring more diversity to the campus. He said UNO targeted eight people for that program two years ago, an additional four last year and then four more this year.

He said intensified efforts to recruit minority faculty members should be evident in the fall. Of 52 new faculty members, he said, 12 are Hispanics, Blacks or Native Americans.

Jabin Moore, a UNO senior and student-body president, said he has taken some Black studies courses in part just to study with Black professors. Outside of those classes, Moore said, he hasn't had a single Black faculty member. And in some classes, he said, he has been the only Black man.

Nevertheless, he said, his meetings with UNO administrators suggest to him that they want to hire more minorities. They are "not trying to sugar-coat things," he said, and they're working at it.

Moore said he feels the nation is on the cusp of reform. "I definitely think change will happen," said the Omahan, who is majoring in business.

Batool Ibrahim, a junior and president of the Black Student Union at UNL, said it's important for Black

students to see Black professors. They understand what it's like to be a Black student, Ibrahim said, and they inspire students.
She said she has had only one Black professor in her time at UNL. That was Kwakiutl Dreher, an English professor, who became a bit of a guide and mentor for Ibrahim in her freshman year. "I cannot thank her enough for her investment in me as a Black scholar," said Ibrahim, who plans to become an attorney.
Martonia Gaskill, a Latino professor at UNK, said the increase in Hispanic students at UNK has been impressive.
"UNK has made a priority to serve underrepresented populations," said Gaskill, who is a faculty member in teacher education and UNK's Faculty Senate president this year. "And we are doing quite well in that area. But we need to do the same with faculty."
It's not enough just to hire minority faculty members, she said. They need to feel supported and at home once they're on campus. "And you have to understand that it's a two-way thing," she said. "You have to be open to change yourself (and) adapt."
When Claude Louishomme was hired in 2000 by UNK's political science department, the NU system had a pool of money for hiring women and minorities, he said.
"From what I see, there hasn't been any concerted effort" since then, said Louishomme, who is Black. New NU President Ted Carter has said campus diversity is a priority for him.
Louishomme said he has stayed in part because "I love my colleagues. I work with thoughtful, supportive, kind folks."
Now settled in Lawrence, Blansett and Nelson said they were disappointed that UNO didn't fight to keep them. But they are eager to get started at Kansas.
Blansett said: "I just said, 'I'd rather go to a place that I'm wanted.'
By Rick Ruggles

LJS: UNL to host online graduation

More than 700 degrees will be given to University of Nebraska-Lincoln students who completed their education over the summer term in a virtual ceremony later this month, according to a UNL news release.
The ceremony will take place Saturday at 9 a.m. and will feature a commencement address by Marilyn Moore, retired associate superintendent of Lincoln Public Schools and past president of the Bryan College of Health Sciences, and appearances from other special guests.
Graduates will be eligible to participate in an in-person graduation ceremony when it is deemed safe to do so.
"We absolutely want to welcome all of these graduates to return in the future, once campus is reopened, to walk across the stage in cap and gown and have that once-in-a-lifetime moment to share with their friends and family," said Vanessa Gorman, professor of history and chair of the university's commencement committee.
Diplomas will be mailed to students following the ceremony.
Graduates will receive a graduation cap through the mail so that they can turn their tassels with their classmates during the virtual ceremony.
By Nick McConnell

OWH: Reports: Big Ten preparing to punt college football for 2020

LINCOLN — The college football season — at least for fall 2020 — teetered on the brink of ending as multiple national news outlets, citing anonymous sources, reported that Big Ten presidents were meeting Sunday night to discuss postponing all fall sports until at least 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

ESPN reported that the commissioners of the Power Five conferences — the ACC, Big 12, Big Ten, Pac-12 and SEC — met Sunday to discuss the possibility of sports this fall, just days after the Big Ten schedule and additional SEC opponents were announced. Sports Illustrated, also citing anonymous sources, reported that the Big Ten presidents are moving toward postponement, with an eye on convincing other Power Five leagues to join them in a joint announcement.

By Sunday night, the same national outlets, citing anonymous sources, said no final decision had been made by the league presidents.

Reached by text, Husker Athletic Director Bill Moos said there may be "more to discuss" Monday after the Big Ten athletic directors, as they have more than 100 times this summer, have a conference call. "Should know more by then," he said.

World-Herald requests for comment from two key decision-makers at Nebraska — NU President Ted Carter and UNL Chancellor Ronnie Green — were not immediately answered Sunday evening by the university's communications office. Nebraska coach Scott Frost is scheduled to talk to the press at 1:30 p.m. Monday.

Reported talks to end the season accelerated quickly after the Mid-American Conference announced the postponement of its season on Saturday. Already, several FCS leagues had announced their decision to move seasons to the spring. Also on Saturday, the Big Ten voted to keep teams in helmets-only practices until further notice. Most teams were scheduled to move to padded practices Monday or Tuesday.

As news poured in Sunday, a group of college football players on social media, led by Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence, lobbied the leaders of the sport to let the 2020 football season happen using the hashtag #WeWantToPlay, which, by Sunday night, was trending on Twitter.

Lawrence suggested that players might be more likely to contract COVID-19 outside the structure of a daily football regimen.

"Players will be sent home to their own communities where social distancing is highly unlikely and medical care and expenses will be placed on families if they were to contract COVID-19," he said. "… Football is a safe haven for so many people. We are more likely to get the virus in everyday life than playing football."

Lawrence said having a season also incentivizes players to stay as safe as possible, echoing comments made by Nebraska football coach Scott Frost in June.

"Whether our kids are playing football games or not, or whether our kids are practicing football or not, they're at just as high risk — or even a higher risk — of getting it without that structure," Frost said. "That's another reason we allowed kids to come back — because of the structure and things to do."

Last week, after the Big Ten released its schedule and testing protocols — and after two Big Ten players, purporting to represent thousands of league athletes, called for even more stringent testing regimens — a group of Nebraska football players also took to Twitter calling for a season.

"Nebraska has done a great job of doing things the right way and has protected us players," quarterback Adrian Martinez said. "We'll find a way to play here!"

Sunday night, NU strength and conditioning coach Zach Duval tweeted "#LetsPlayFootball," a sentiment retweeted by some Husker football players.

Late Sunday night, players who had been using the #WeWantToPlay hashtag began a new social media campaign organized by the National College Players Association, the group behind the Pac-12 United

movement from the previous weekend. Unlike that movement, this new movement called for the establishment of a college players union, a step the NCPA tried and failed to enact in 2014, along with safety protocols and eligibility protections.

If the news keeps trending in the same direction, the Big Ten will stop a season before it gets close to starting.

By Sam McKewon

GII: Nebraska among the highest rates of farm bankruptcies

COVID-19 has increased the financial stress of farmers and ranchers, who were already struggling because of low commodity prices prior to the pandemic.

The American Farm Bureau Federation recently reported farm bankruptcies increased 8% over a 12-month period, with 580 filings from June 2019 to June 2020.

A six-month comparison by AFBF, however, shows the number of new Chapter 12 filings slowing. According to AFBF, several contributing factors are likely at play as farmers struggle to stay afloat during the pandemic.

The Midwest, Northwest and Southeast were hardest hit, representing 80% of the filings across the U.S. Wisconsin led the nation with 69 filings, followed by 38 in Nebraska. Georgia and Minnesota each had 36 filings.

A closer examination of the numbers, AFBF said, shows that while year-over-year filings increased for the month of June, filings slowed during the first six months of 2020 compared with the first half of 2019.

The latest AFBF Market Intel, written jointly with the Association of Chapter 12 Trustees, shows from January to June 2020, there were 284 new Chapter 12 bankruptcy cases, 10 fewer than the same time in 2019.

CARES aid distribution

According to AFBF, the reduction in filings coincides with aid distributed in the CARES Act that compensates farmers and ranchers for losses incurred from January through mid-April. The Association of Chapter 12 Trustees reported that approximately 60% of farm bankruptcies are successfully completed — the highest successful percentage of all the reorganization chapters.

“Every farm bankruptcy potentially represents the end of a family’s dream,” said Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation. Duvall said the fact that bankruptcy filings slowed in the first six months of 2020 shows “how important the economic stimulus alongside the food and agricultural aid from the CARES Act have been in keeping farms above water, but the economic impact of the pandemic is far from over.”

“It’s imperative that Congress addresses the challenges facing farmers and ranchers in current coronavirus relief legislation.”

As of Monday, AFBF said that $6.8 billion in CFAP payments have been delivered to farmers and ranchers. Many farmers, according to the AFBF, particularly those who are not regularly eligible for aid, have not applied for assistance or may not know the assistance is available. Farmers can learn more about coronavirus assistance at www.farmers.gov/cfap.

More to the story

AFBF Chief Economist John Newton said bankruptcy numbers don’t tell the whole story.

“The fact that the bankruptcy process is now virtual probably contributed to a decline in numbers,” Newton said. “CARES Act assistance was also a bandage that slowed the bleeding on many farms, but those protections will soon expire. Without more help we could expect to see filings begin to rise

again."

One area of the farm economy that is struggling is the ethanol industry. Nebraska is the nation's second leading producer of ethanol and a vital market for Nebraska corn production. Nebraska has 25 ethanol plants.

A recent story in the Omaha World-Herald reported the ethanol industry's losses have been more severe than economists originally predicted, said David Swenson, an Iowa State University economist. He said it could be years before fuel demand recovers from losses related to the coronavirus pandemic and other factors that left the U.S. economy in recession.

"The ethanol industry is in worse shape than we thought prior to this pandemic," said Swenson. Ethanol companies have been losing money for more than 18 months, Swenson said, and really only have one path to survival.

"Growth will come from exports, period," Swenson said.

Swenson said the ethanol industry has suffered because higher fuel efficiency standards for vehicles has reduced demand, as have a reduction to travel due to the coronavirus pandemic and other factors. He said the boom in domestic oil production, which made the United States the world's largest producers, also hurt markets for ethanol, which was seen as a way to reduce reliance on foreign oil supplies.

Cortney Cowley, economist Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, recently reported the emergence of COVID-19 in the United States has created "substantial challenges for all segments of the meat supply chain, but especially for producers and consumers."

Cowley said that beginning in April, outbreaks of COVID-19 at meatpacking plants led to significant disruptions and created issues of oversupply and low prices for livestock producers.

"These disruptions temporarily reduced meat production, which led to higher prices for consumers, making it more difficult for some households to purchase meat," Cowley said.

He said consumers also shifted purchases of meat from foodservice to retail outlets, creating logistical challenges in the supply chain and putting additional upward pressure on wholesale and retail prices.

"Meat production continued to lag 2019 levels even after plants reopened, and changing consumer patterns could have persistent effects on supply chains," Cowley said.

He said the agricultural economy had been in a prolonged downturn prior to the pandemic, intensifying concerns of how COVID-19 and disruptions in the meat production could affect farm finances.

In 2020, Cowley said working capital on U.S. farms was forecast to decline 16% from the previous year, and if realized, would be 72% less than in 2012.

"Although farm solvency ratios have increased only modestly, liquidity has declined more considerably since 2012, highlighting weakening financial conditions among agricultural producers," he said. "Amid disruptions related to COVID-19, prices for cattle began to decline in February and, by the end of April, had declined more than 20%. Prices for hogs were slightly stronger in February and March but also declined sharply in April."

Cowley said that modified operations and revised processes related to COVID-19 at packing plants may continue to put constraints on meat production.

"In addition, higher retail prices, particularly in the midst of an economic downturn, could temporarily reduce aggregate meat consumption, further weighing on the outlook for producers and consumers of meat," he said.

By Robert Pore

GII: Scaled-back Nebraska State Fair will be celebration of 4-Hand FFA competitors

GRAND ISLAND, Neb. — Ten food vendors and 20 commercial vendors will be on hand for this year's Nebraska State Fair.

There will be no concerts inside the Heartland Events Center, but musicians will perform outdoors in the evenings.

So while the fair won't look much like a normal state fair, there will be things to do — and to eat.

There will also be young people to honor. The State Fair, which runs from Aug. 28 to Sept. 7, will be "a celebration of Nebraska 4-H and FFA youth," says Executive Director Bill Ogg.

Some of the plans, though, have not been nailed down. It's not yet certain if the fair will have open-class livestock shows.

The 4-H events will take place the first weekend, with FFA the second. They are separated to foster social distancing.

"I am proud of the fair board for supporting our Nebraska 4-H and FFA youth," Ogg said.

Offering those events is very important, he said. And it's not done without cost.

"There's well over $200,000 that will be invested in that," Ogg said.

While he applauds the decision to go ahead with this year's fair and supports it, financially it would have been better for Nebraska to follow the lead of other states and cancel the fair.

But, Ogg said, it will be good for people to get together.

Programs and policies are in place to keep people safe, Ogg said.

"But that said, people are hungry to get together," he said. "They are hungry for a wholesome social interaction. That's what the fair is. It's a reunion of people, an annual get-together where you may share a corn dog with your neighbor, who you don't talk to all year long.

That's what we want the fair to be."

Officials have invited other breed associations to take part.

"If they can basically fund their own show, then we certainlywill provide the facilities and be as hospitable in hosting their event as we can," Ogg said. "But in terms of assuming the risk or offering the prize money that the fair typically does, we can't do that this year."

Some of the fair's events are up to those groups.

"The ball is in their court," Ogg said. "If we get 650 head of cattle entries, we'll have an open-class livestock show. If we get a certain number of Boer goat entries, we'll have a Boer goat show. So it's all entry-dependent."

He hopes the exhibitors step up, and he means that in an "encouraging and inviting" way, he said.

"I sincerely hope we can do it. But it's one of those deals where they're coming for the bragging rights and the advertising of having the grand champion at the Nebraska State Fair, not for the prizemoney and awards, because that's unavailable to us this year," Ogg said.

Musicians will perform evenings from 7 to 9 p.m. The shows will take place at the Pump & Pantry Party Pit on the Pepsi Party Stage.

Those artists are "coming and performing because they love to perform," Ogg said. They will not be paid.

The open-class livestock shows, if they happen, will take place during the week.

Also on weekdays, fairgoers may enjoy Raising Nebraska, which Ogg praises.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission will have activities, which will be focused on the weekends.

School tours will not take place, Ogg said. Admission to the fair will be free. A veterans program will be held on Labor Day.

Most traditional types of fair food will be available. Ogg hopes that local residents will visit the fair for lunch or dinner.

The commercial vendors will set up outdoors. Many of them will be more of a display type of vendor rather than an "actual overthe-counter retail type of vendor," he said, adding that "our business partners have been so cooperative."
Those vendors are appearing almost more to support the fair than they are for economic benefit, he said.
The 4-H and FFA events will be strong and attract good numbers, Ogg said.
"Beyond that, I don't anticipate large crowds. Again, the attractions are so much fewer than what we, I think, want and have expected the fair to provide," he said.
Fair officials "genuinely are excited to host what we've got. And then we take a breath and say we don't have much," Ogg said.
The fair will also have equine events.
Ogg expects a foundation quarter-horse show and mounted shooting, team penning and cutting events.
There won't be any motor sports or a carnival.
But there is still a possibility of a bullfighting event. Tickets would be required for that event, which would run the opening weekend.
The evening concerts will provide people an opportunity to just get together and celebrate something good, Ogg said.
Ogg,who started his job in June, can't really encourage large gatherings because it's contrary to the wishes of health officials and political leaders.
"So we want people to come, again, for the wholesome aspect of a reunion with their neighbors" and to support 4-H and FFA members, he said.
"I personally would like them to come to know that we didn't close the doors, and we're doing the best that we can," Ogg said.
He wants to welcome their advice and guidance about "how to return the Nebraska State Fair to even a bigger and a brighter future."
By Jeff Bahr

Scottsbluff SH: Yurts built in Sidney come with a ‘cool factor’

SIDNEY -- When Ken Sawyer’s business partner from South Dakota called him asking if he would like to run a yurt factory, Sawyer jokes that he replied the way most folks would: “What the heck is a yurt?”
Within a week, Sawyer was on his way to Colorado to check out the factory there, and within a month, Freedom Yurt-Cabins had moved to the Sidney Industrial Park.
A yurt is a round structure, most often soft-sided, or as Sawyer, operations manager and president of the company, describes it, “a glorified tent.” The yurt came from the original ger, a Mongolian form of the structure that was portable and often covered with skins or felt for nomadic groups in Central Asia.
Freedom Yurt-Cabins are not soft-sided, but they can be moved. They are more of a cabin structure, but with insulated sides, flooring and a ceiling. The roof is covered with a Duro-Last material able to withstand high winds and hail.
The yurts range from 219 square feet up to 490 square feet and weigh between 5,000 and 9,500 pounds. The company has some clients who place their yurts in their back yard as a sort of guest house, and some who are using their yurt as a location for home schooling. Yoga studios, massage parlors and a mountain biking facility have all used Freedom’s yurts, and the city of Grand Prairie, Texas, will be putting yurts around the community’s lakes for rentals.
Kits are shipped to the consumer for assembly using detailed instructions and videos provided by the

company. Sawyer said it would take a typical team of two to three people three to four days to assemble the final product, depending on the skill level of the individuals doing the work.
Freedom currently employs nine full-time and four part-time workers with plans to expand production. The Sidney City Council recently approved $112,500 in economic development funding to help the company reach its goal of doubling production in 2021.
Sawyer, who grew up in Valentine, attended Eastern Wyoming College for its welding program and started his career at Tuttle Inc. in Friend. He said he has worked a number of jobs over the years, always working his way up to a supervisory position. He started a business in Colorado installing sound system cabinetry and insulation until he and wife, Misty, moved to South Dakota for a few years. When Misty landed a new job in Sidney, they came back to Nebraska.
Yurts made in the Sidney facility can withstand winds up to 120 mph, and can be found from Alaska and Canada and all the way to the Patagonia region of Chile. A customer recently indicated she would be placing a Freedom yurt on the Arctic Circle.
“Some are off-grid, so they’re totally without power and heating and air and all that,” marketing manager Scott Cowan said. “They’re for the survivalists who want to just go out and have a cabin in the woods and get away from it all. Then you have the people who really set them up nice and have a complete house set-up.”
Some users connect multiple yurts for a different type of living experience. Cowan said the sky is the limit for the yurts, as he found out on his first visit to the factory.
“They had one set up in the back, and I went in it, and as soon as you walk in one, you want one,” he said. “There’s just this cool factor to them.”
By Mark McCarthy

OWH Editorial: Nebraska begins a smart strategy to boost local arts economies

The arts are an important part of community identity. If properly nurtured and supported, they’re also an important part of a community’s economy.
Nebraska’s “creative economy” generates more than $5 billion in sales while supporting more than 40,000 jobs, according to Michael Seman, a Colorado State University professor specializing in arts management and economic development issues. That’s a considerable contribution to local economies and community spirit, whether from performances at a large venue such as the Orpheum or Holland Center in Omaha or at smaller settings in communities such as Brownville, Holdrege, McCook, Scottsbluff and at county fairs and festivals across the state.
The Nebraska Legislature acknowledged the importance of arts promotion by recently approving legislation to designate “creative districts” in Nebraska communities. A creative district is “an urban area intended to create a critical mass of places of cultural consumption, including art galleries, theaters, music venues and public squares,” says the bill sponsor, State Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha. Nebraska has been one of only two states lacking creative district designations.
At least 20 Nebraska communities have sent word to the Nebraska Arts Council that they intend to apply for such a designation, says Suzanne Wise, the council’s executive director. “We’ve identified six candidates in Omaha alone,” Wise told The World-Herald. “One community asked us if we’d consider the county a cultural district. So interest is running the gamut from the expected, Omaha and Lincoln, to really small towns.”
Down the road, communities participating in the program will be able to apply for competitive grants. One revenue source will be arts-related specialty license plates just approved by the Legislature.
“A cultural district program is a great policy tool,” says Seman, who has done an academic paper on

Omaha's music scene and the local economy. "Formally acknowledging these districts and offering ways to help develop the physical spaces facilitating creative activity, innovation and entrepreneurship, while also lending support to those driving it, is smart and will pay dividends to the entire community. One needs only to look at Omaha's music scene, Saddle Creek Records and Slowdown to see the benefits of city leaders working with their local creative ecosystem and leveraging policy tools to help it reach the next level."

A community doesn't have to be large to have a viable creative district, Wise says. She cites the example of a small town in western Nebraska: "They may not have an art museum or performing arts center, but they've probably got a community hall where everything from town council meetings to touring cowboy poets perform. Perhaps a locally owned Western clothing store. A café that makes a local breakfast specialty that no one outside of the community has ever heard of. A dance and yoga studio and a public library that has a small art gallery space and genealogical corner. They may not think of themselves as a cultural district, but when you put all of these things together, it creates a portrait of a unique community."

In Boone County, Paul and Lori Hosford have been co-directors of the Albion Area Arts Council since 2005. They well explain the value the arts provide Nebraska communities: "We believe that communities are multifaceted ecosystems — everything relates to everything else. By looking at all aspects of a community, the cultural infrastructure — an 'intangible' infrastructure that no one can see or touch — becomes evident. This cultural infrastructure is as important to a sustainable community as water and power and streets are. ... Thus to be successful in the long term, community development needs to focus on much more than just chasing smokestacks — it needs to identify and nurture what makes a community 'tick.' "

It's a smart strategy for Nebraska to nurture communities' creative spirit, to the benefit of their economy and sense of place.

OWH Editorial: Omaha's public-private partnership for VA project serves as a national model

Officials will gather this month to dedicate the new, $86 million Omaha VA ambulatory clinic. The event will present an occasion for celebration on two important counts.

Above all, our area can salute the sound design of the new, 157,000-square-feet facility and the care it will provide Nebraska veterans.

In addition, Omahans can appreciate how the public-partnership approach that Omaha has pioneered for so many successful local projects is being lauded as a national model for other VA projects where practical.

The original cost estimate for the Omaha VA project was $120 million. But significant savings in cost and construction time came within reach once Heritage Services, which has spearheaded a range of public-private civic partnerships in Omaha, stepped forward to participate.

Local philanthropic contributions for the project totaled $30 million, and a private-sector design review method reduced the construction timeline by almost four and a half months, a Government Accountability Office report found.

In the end, the total cost dropped to $86 million, more than 28% below the original estimate.

This achievement stands in great contrast to the delays and cost overruns experienced in some other VA projects, most notably in Aurora, Colorado.

The new Omaha facility is set to offer impressive medical care for Omaha-area veterans. The clinic will feature new exam rooms, an outpatient-surgery suite and a women's health clinic, allowing about 400

additional outpatients to visit the medical center each day. Patients for the women's clinics will have their own waiting and service areas.
More primary care rooms are on the middle floor, which is connected to the main hospital by a hallway decorated with windows built to resemble the colored cloth ribbons on a service member's uniform.
Members of Nebraska's congressional delegation helped this project move forward by clearing away procedural roadblocks, since Congress needed to change federal law in order for the Omaha public-private approach to proceed. Former 2nd District U.S. Rep. Lee Terry pushed for the change, and his successor, Rep. Brad Ashford, worked successfully across the partisan divide to get congressional leaders to allow a vote. First District Rep. Jeff Fortenberry lent support, and current 2nd District Rep. Don Bacon has kept close tabs recently. Sen. Deb Fischer steered it forward in Congress's upper house.
Omaha-area residents can celebrate laudable benefits from this ambitious, well-done project: millions of dollars in cost savings and, most important of all, improved medical care for our area's veterans.

OWH Editorial: Nebraska lawmakers must join together to finish 2020 session constructively

Nebraska state senators return to the Capitol on Tuesday, and only three days remain in this year's legislative session. It's a tight schedule. But lawmakers must complete a crucial task.
They must move the compromise on taxes and business incentives forward, amending it as appropriate, then give it final passage.
In doing so, they can demonstrate to the public that they can move past their honest differences and avoid the gridlock that so often afflicts Congress and burdens our nation.
This doesn't mean all state senators will be happy with the outcome — it's a compromise. Lawmakers and stakeholders have been woefully fractured for months on these tax, school funding and incentives issues. So, the only way forward is through a responsibly negotiated compromise. Which fortunately is what the Legislature has before it.
Lawmakers made an encouraging start in the first round of debate. From differing perspectives and interests, they identified areas for further discussion, scrutiny and, in some cases, amendment. They sent the much-needed message that they want to work together to hone the legislation into final form.
This week, they must finish that important task. They must demonstrate they can come together for the good of Nebraska.

OWH Editorial: A rare political success boosts our treasured national parks

It's a win as tall as the sequoias, as deep as the Grand Canyon, as broad as Death Valley.
Forgive the hyperbole — we are giddy that our divided, sclerotic Congress came together to approve the Great American Outdoors Act, signed this week by President Donald Trump.
The law, which passed the House 310-107 and the Senate 73-25 and had backing of 850 organizations, will enable the National Park Service to work on $20 billion in deferred maintenance at national parks, ensuring preservation of our national heritage.
Called the most consequential conservation bill in a generation by the Sierra Club, it provides $900 million a year to the Land and Water Conservation Fund and makes that a mandatory spending program. The fund was created in the 1960s and was to be financed with lease payments from energy development on federal lands, but that money was consistently used for other purposes.
While Nebraska doesn't have a national park and only a little national forest, we all can enjoy visiting places such as Yellowstone, Badlands, Yosemite, Arches and so many more. Some of the money from

the new law also goes to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Indian Education, and will be used for parks and playgrounds in urban areas.

With nearly a billion dollars a year in spending and a massive backlog of maintenance, the act provides infrastructure jobs — the type of spending that helped lift the country from the Great Depression and built many civic assets still in use.

All this good was achieved after 20 years of advocacy, with House sponsors ranging from the late John Lewis to Nebraska's Jeff Fortenberry. It was pushed to the finish line by two Western senators in tough re-election races: Cory Gardner of Colorado and Steve Daines of Montana. They met with Trump in March and won his support. It's as if the political system worked.

Writer and historian Wallace Stegner called our national parks "the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst."

So there's your good news for August. We now return to 2020, already in progress.

OWH Editorial: Blood plasma donations are an important weapon against COVID-19

We need every weapon possible against COVID-19. A vital one is blood plasma, proven to help people who are recovering from the virus. Appointments for donations can be made with the American Red Cross and the Nebraska Community Blood Bank. The need is considerable. These donations are a great way to help our community during this extraordinary emergency.

OWH: Weysan Dun: Don't revoke police officers' qualified immunity

Without question, policing and law enforcement in the United States must continue to improve to better reflect the expectations of our changing society. Several proposals for police reform legislation have been offered; some have merit, some require refinement and some are ill-advised. We must balance potential benefits with negative and possible unintended consequences when considering change.

One proposal that would have significant and potentially negative consequences is restricting or eliminating qualified immunity for law enforcement officials.

Qualified immunity applies to most government officials, not just to police officers. It was originated in 1982 by the U.S. Supreme Court in Harlow v. Fitzgerald, wherein the court explained, "government officials performing discretionary functions generally are shielded from liability for civil damages insofar as their conduct does not violate clearly established statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person would have known." This shield is not absolute. It does not protect "the plainly incompetent or those who knowingly violate the law," the Supreme Court said in Malley v. Briggs in 1986.

It's not true, as some believe, that qualified immunity prevents accountability for police misconduct. To the contrary, it protects both society and law enforcement in a carefully balanced manner that has been refined by the courts over many years. As the U.S. Supreme Court stated in Pearson v. Callahan in 2009, "Qualified immunity balances two important interests — the need to hold public officials accountable when they exercise power irresponsibly and the need to shield officials from harassment, distraction and liability when they perform their duties reasonably."

The rationale for qualified immunity for police is twofold. First, it permits officers to perform their duties without fear of constantly defending themselves against tenuous claims. Second, it allows the public to recover damages when a reasonable officer would know that their conduct violates a person's constitutional or legal rights. Police officers are entitled to qualified immunity only when their

actions do not violate a clearly established statutory or constitutional right. The objective reasonableness test is used to determine if the officer is entitled to it; the officer is judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene, rather than with the vision of 20/20 hindsight. Qualified immunity is not a guarantee against being sued.

Law enforcement is a difficult profession, with many challenges and risks, as well as significant intangible rewards. Law officers often must make split-second, life-or-death decisions where any hesitation can result in serious injury or death.

The widely publicized 2018 case involving Omaha Police Officer Ken Fortune and John Ezell Jr., provides a vivid example of how quickly police actions can become deadly for the officer. After a brief chase and car stop, Officer Fortune approached the car in which Ezell was a passenger. Ezell opened the car door and said "what's going on?" as he pointed a gun and shot Fortune. Officer Fortune did not have time to unholster his sidearm, let alone return fire. Ezell then shot at other officers before he was shot by return fire. Both Officer Fortune and Ezell survived and no one else was injured. This case shows how quickly police officers can face fatal injury: In the length of time it takes to say "what's going on?"an officer was shot with no prior indication of a deadly threat.

Our society expects a lot from officers. We expect them to confront potentially dangerous individuals so we do not have to do so. We expect them to deal with horrific scenes that would give most people nightmares. We expect them to react with unwavering compassion and understanding when dealing with people experiencing the worst moments of their lives, regardless of the officers' own life stresses. We expect them to react calmly and professionally when confronted with verbal and sometimes physical abuse. We literally expect them to run toward the sounds of gunfire while others are running away. Police officers live up to these expectations every day.

We rightfully expect a lot of law officers because we entrust them with significant power and authority. However, we should not expect them to be injured or killed while doing their job, nor should we expect them to put their livelihoods and the financial welfare of their families on the line every time they are forced to make a split-second, life-or-death decision.

Our courts have granted law enforcement officers qualified immunity, with significant limits. Further restrictions or outright elimination of qualified immunity could make it virtually impossible to recruit qualified individuals into the profession. It could also cause officers to hesitate at critical moments, resulting in serious injury or death, and could make officers reluctant to engage in high-risk situations, which would be deleterious for public safety.

Laws are the fabric of civil society. We entrust law enforcement officers with the power to uphold and enforce those laws. Law enforcement officers keep the fabric of our society from being torn apart by those who have no respect for others. They are the "thin blue line" between civil society and anarchy. We should not make their jobs more difficult.

Weysan Dun is a retired veteran of the FBI and served as the special agent in charge of multiple FBI field offices around the U.S., including the Omaha field office, which covers Nebraska and Iowa.

OWH Midlands Voices: New Omaha VA clinic is the fruit of strong collaboration

Nebraska is proudly home to over 120,000 veterans, representing nearly 10% of our state's adult population. These veterans fought for our country in conflicts across the world, from the Pacific to Europe to the Middle East. While we can never fully repay them for their sacrifice, we can provide them with the high-quality medical care promised to them in exchange for their service.

On Aug. 17, Omaha's new VA ambulatory care clinic, which includes 157,000 square feet of suites for outpatient surgeries, a section designed specifically for care for female veterans, and new exam rooms,

will open its doors. The clinic demonstrates a genuine commitment toward fulfilling our promise to our veterans. These services are more important than ever as thousands of our veterans are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This $86 million project was the result of a public-private partnership that I was proud to help bring into fruition and that should serve as a model for other communities looking to serve their veterans. Since my election in 2012, this project has been a priority of mine. In 2016, with infrastructure aging at the Omaha VA facility, Congress appropriated $56 million for a new veterans' ambulatory care clinic. However, the project was low on the list of priorities for the Department of Veterans Affairs, and significantly more funding was needed.

Nebraska community leaders and businesses developed a creative solution, which became the CHIP In for Vets Act. This legislation allowed community members to help take care of their own local veterans by contributing to the planning and construction of VA facilities. By allowing outside groups to pitch-in, projects could be completed more efficiently than through federal construction alone. As I worked with then-U.S. Reps. Brad Ashford and Lee Terry, representing Nebraska's 2nd District, as well as VA Secretary Bob McDonald, to move this legislation across the hurdles, Omaha business leaders who were enthusiastic about the idea got to work raising an additional $30 million locally for the project.

Securing the passage of any legislation requires quite a bit of elbow grease and focus these days, but we took to the challenge the entrepreneurial and tireless Nebraska spirit that animated the project from the outset, navigating political roadblocks along the way. I worked on a bipartisan basis with leadership such as former Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., then chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md. In December 2016, the CHIP In for Vets Act passed Congress. Shortly after, President Barack Obama signed it into law, paving the way for construction on the new Omaha VA facility to begin.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, this clinic has now been completed according to schedule in just two years and will soon be open to the public. Because of the public-private partnership, the VA was able to build this facility more quickly and approximately $34 million under the original $120 million cost estimate for a standard VA federal construction project.

For other states and communities looking to serve their veterans, the success of Omaha's public-private partnership serves as a model for efficiency and cost-savings. The completion of this clinic highlights what is possible when community leaders work in tandem with the VA and their representatives in Washington to support local veterans. I am proud that my fellow Nebraskans rose to the occasion and helped make this ambulatory care clinic a reality, ensuring that the people who served our country have the care they have earned.

Deb Fischer is Nebraska's senior U.S. senator and a former Nebraska state senator.

OWH Midlands Voices: Nebraska child care businesses face enormous challenges

Steph Allen has already weathered one unimaginable crisis, the nightmare scenario that struck Grand Island and her new Teaching Tree childcare center this spring.

She had to close the Teaching Tree for eight weeks as the COVID pandemic hit Hall County earlier and harder than almost any other spot in Nebraska. When she reopened in June, her enrollment and revenue plunged by 40 percent. It's only now that enrollment is back up and daily operations are starting to feel somewhat normal.

The good news is that both Steph and her high-quality child care center are still standing.

The bad news is that she can already see another crisis looming on the horizon.

"My biggest fear is when school starts back up in Grand Island," she says. "How are parents going to

react if schools have to close? Will my staff want to close here? And if it gets to the point that I have to close again, I will absolutely be in trouble financially unless there's another round of (COVID relief) funding.

"So, what scares me the most? The months of August through December."

Nebraska's child care system is economically staggering four months into COVID-19, according to the Buffett Early Childhood Institute's new statewide survey of 1,000 licensed child care providers. The next four months could bring further financial blows that many child care providers won't survive.

Most child care providers responding to the survey lost at least a quarter of their income this spring and summer. Child care centers are faring even worse — nearly 4 of 10 report that income has been sliced in half this year.

This situation would have looked even more dire if not for COVID aid. More than a third of Nebraska child care providers surveyed have received federal Personal Protection Program loans. Two-thirds received smaller, $1,000 private grants. Every provider interviewed for this story portrayed those funds as a lifesaver as they struggled to stay afloat.

But too many child care providers are sinking — and many more could sink soon.

Roughly 1 of every 7 Nebraska child care providers was closed for business in June, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Many will never reopen, further straining an already strained system — many providers already operated on shoestring budgets, and many Nebraska families already struggled to find affordable, quality care for their children long before COVID-19.

The looming crisis: Many more Nebraska child care businesses appear to be barely above water. More than half the providers surveyed said they will "definitely" or "probably" need financial assistance if the pandemic continues into fall and winter.

Put another way: Half of providers surveyed say they will likely close their doors without financial help.

"Calling this an economic crisis is accurate," says Dr. Kathleen Gallagher, the Buffett Institute's director of research and evaluation. "We heard again and again from providers, that if this continues, they don't think they will make it."

The past four months have also taken a worrisome toll on the physical and emotional health of Nebraska's providers as they care for our children.

More than three-quarters of providers surveyed report stress-related sleep changes during COVID. More than half say they are having trouble concentrating. Roughly half report that they are sad or depressed some or most of the time.

Yet providers are still resiliently showing up for work, say Gallagher and Dr. Alexandra Daro, a Buffett Institute research specialist and survey co-author. Many providers report using self-care practices like deep breathing and walks outside to be able to cope and get ready for the next workday.

"This is so Nebraskan," Gallagher said. "These people are in pain, and they are still doing their jobs."

Said Daro: "But they are also flat-out saying, 'I am worn out. I am tired. This is taking its toll.'"

Rita Kirch, a longtime child care provider in Oshkosh, said her 24-child business never closed this spring as COVID cases stayed low in her western Nebraska county.

But Kirch still lost half of her children and income this spring before returning to nearly full capacity in July. She may have had to shut down her business if she hadn't received a PPP loan, she says.

Kirch thinks her child care will make it, so long as COVID doesn't hammer Garden County. If the virus does spread in the area, the future darkens.

"As this year has gone on, we have gotten into a better routine and had more structure here," she said. "We're sticking together. So that's good.

"But I don't think we are ever going to be normal again."

Matthew Hansen, managing editor at the Buffett Institute, is a longtime Nebraska newspaper columnist.

OWH: Mask usage

Gov. Ricketts believes there would be fewer people wearing masks if they were mandated to wear them, and he may be right, as there does appear to be a defiant attitude toward mask wearing predominant in the state. But in Kearney what I observe is that people only wear masks in stores like Walmart and Menards where they are mandatory. Everywhere else they go without.
Andrew White, Kearney

OWH: OPS isn't the one to blame

If you are upset about the decisions regarding the opening of Omaha Public Schools, you need to place a call directly to the Governor's Office. Gov. Ricketts' inaction is directly responsible for the increase in COVID cases we are now experiencing, putting Nebraska on the national "hot" list. He has stubbornly refused to implement a mask mandate, address state outbreak hot spots and opened businesses too soon — all of which, if addressed, would have reduced infections. Ricketts is obviously more concerned about his national standing and relationship with the White House, than he is with the welfare of the citizens of our state.
Scott Winkler, Omaha

OWH: Ricketts 1.0 logic

Welcome to the petri dish in the world series of the coronavirus. We Omahans have now been recognized as owners of our very own COVID-19 spike. Omaha also has reached the dubious status as the only city in the U.S. 100th largest not to require the wearing of face coverings because we have a governor who (watch this slippery logic) believes that we can promote the wearing of masks by not requiring their usage.
Using Pete Ricketts 1.0 logic, one could argue that we don't need any awkward laws or other regulations because they only encourage the behaviors that most of us silly citizens think they deter. I'm not sure whether I have stumbled into "Alice in Wonderland" or a quirky Cornhusker State version of "Nineteen Eighty-Four." If requiring the wearing of masks in the face of a deadly disease will only tempt people not to follow the law, what do we need laws for anyway? Why elect a governor at all? If speed limits only tempt people to step on the gas, why pay police to issue speeding tickets? Under Ricketts 1.0 logic, junking penalties for drunken driving should encourage sobriety.
Bruce E. Johansen, Omaha

LJS Editorial, 8/9: 'Grand bargain' by Legislature a throwback to nonpartisanship

The Nebraska Legislature this week provided a lesson in negotiation, compromise and responsible governance that the Congress would do well to emulate.
It did so when it crafted a bill that provides property tax relief for all Nebraskans, creates a new business development tax incentive program and pledges millions in state funding for a $2.6 billion project at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.
Presented separately, the measures became intertwined and gridlocked with a group of largely rural

senators, who favored the proposed property tax relief bill, holding hostage the business incentive and UNMC bills that were sought by the urban and business interests.

Enter a “super seven” group of lawmakers brought together by Speaker Jim Scheer to hammer out a comprehensive bill that would, somehow, satisfy competing interests and, importantly, be able to gain approval in the final days of the coronavirus-split legislative session.

The result was LB1107, which with its filibuster-proof 43-2 advancement Wednesday is certain to pass by the session's end and has the support of Gov. Pete Ricketts.

As is the case with every compromise, LB1107, in the words of Sen. John McCollister, is “a very good bill” but “perfect it is not.”

Rural property tax relief leaders complained that the $125 million in new state income tax credits to owners of homes, businesses and farmland -- estimated to be the equivalent of a 6% property tax cut -- was too small.

At the same time, Sen. Kate Bolz of Lincoln and others were concerned that the property tax credits that will rise to $375 million in their fifth year and the UNMC project that will require $300 million in state funds could deplete the state’s cash reserve funds and, without future tax increases, result in drastic cuts to existing state programs, including the University of Nebraska.

The Journal Star editorial board shares those concerns, particularly as the state is bracing for the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on tax revenues and won’t receive revenues from the businesses that take advantage of the development tax exemptions.

It also would have been more assuring if the bill had appropriated some cash to cover part of the state’s share of the UNMC project, which is dependent on federal designation of a new national disaster response center on the Omaha campus.

That said, the broad result of LB1107 is nothing but positive as it successfully addresses three priorities -- property tax relief, with no lid that would have eventually strangled public schools; the business development incentive, which, unfortunately, the state has to have to compete with others; and starting the process to obtain the disaster response center.

That happened only because senators made a “grand bargain,” with all parties giving up something to get the acceptable and necessary final package.

Admittedly, the nonpartisan nature of the Legislature almost certainly made that compromise easier. But it still should serve as an example for the Democrats, Republicans and Trump administration in Washington as the way to address the issues staggering the country, starting with the economic relief package.

LJS Local View: A step beyond punishment

On July 13, a couple of news stories that detailed two tragic events in Lincoln made their rounds on various news outlets. In separate, yet, unrelated instances over the span of a day, two human lives were lost at the hands of two different men a mere five blocks apart from each other.

A couple of days later, I was shooting the breeze with an Uber driver over my lunch hour when small talk turned to mentions of the headlines. My driver said to me jestingly, “You live in that neighborhood, huh? The one with those murders the other day? I wouldn’t want to live down there. You got sons killing their fathers, and people killing each other in the streets. That’s just a bad neighborhood.”

It was the kind of day not seen in Lincoln since 1976, and he had likely seen the headlines or heard the news clips. Perhaps, he’d caught wind of the happenings from a friend of a friend who maybe knew someone who lives in the neighborhood. Who could blame the guy for entering that conversation with

that perception when the events that took place were absolutely horrific tragedies?
Yet, the immediacy of those simple, non-malicious statements felt like a deeply rooted personal attack. In an attempt to unravel my discomfort, I pinpointed it back to a defensiveness at the immediacy of his judgments. You see, the driver had never shared a meal, or even a conversation, with the young men charged in those two deaths.
He had never shared a laugh with either of them, nor called them “neighbor.” Moreover, he had never exchanged a warm smile or a genuine greeting with either of the young men.
Those men are not merely the worst things they’ve ever done. I know this because I am privileged enough to know them both. I’ve shared many meals in my home with one of the young men. I’ve had warm conversation with the other outside his home and seen him often spending time with and caring for his little brother.
I have called both of these young men neighbor. And friend.
My faith instructs me, and many of you, to love our neighbor. If we follow these instructions, it’s impossible to reduce those men to just headlines or soundbites. “… God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'” (Genesis 1:26).
If we subscribe to this belief system and have faith that there is an inherent value and goodness set inside of us by the Creator, we cannot judge so fiercely, and so unempathetically. We are defined by this image and likeness, just as we are defined by the love Christ has for us. We, as humans, are also defined by His capacity to bestow mercy.
I’m not advocating against consequences for our infractions in this world. What I am asking for, however, is that we remind ourselves that they are human, just as we are.
What I am requesting is a willingness to allow others the opportunity for redemption. What I do wish for is a system that allows for redemption and retribution. Restoration and not just punishment. Let us pray that we see no heart as irredeemable. Instead, let us imitate Jesus. Let us know the people around us as our neighbors and let us view them as ... beloved.
Brody M. Van Roekel is executive director of Atlas: Lincoln, an organization that helps people in Lincoln through Christian peer-support and mentorship.

LJS: Don't rush to open schools

I’m sure you’ve heard it said that “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”
For the last several months, we have watched as governors in several states have rushed to reopen everything despite medical advice to the contrary. The warnings were clear; if you open too early, coronavirus cases will spike. Those warnings have sadly come to pass, and some states are now pulling back.
Over 1,000 people are dying daily, and over 159,000 total have died, from COVID-19. Now schools are being pushed to open, and this is again happening against the advice of the medical experts.
Gov. Pete Ricketts bragged early in the battle against the pandemic that everything he was doing was with the advice of experts at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. But those experts are advising against opening schools now, while the case numbers are continuing to climb.
Meanwhile, Ricketts pushes for school openings. Leadership at both the national and state levels have failed us in these dangerous times. When that happens local leaders need to step up. Don’t rush to open the schools until we can be certain that it is safe for our children and our teachers.
Terry Keefe, Lincoln

OWH: How much do endorsements matter? Look at Nebraska's 2nd District race with Bacon, Eastman

Voters often assume who or which group will endorse a given candidate based on the candidate's political party alone. But there can be surprises, including in the race between Republican Rep. Don Bacon and his opponent, Democrat Kara Eastman.

Few voters batted eyes this spring when Bacon, the Omaha area's House incumbent, secured the backing of President Donald Trump and Nebraska's top GOP officeholders, including Gov. Pete Ricketts. Nor did local voters' jaws drop last week when Eastman nabbed the endorsement of former President Barack Obama. His former vice president, Joe Biden, is the Democrats' presumptive presidential nominee.

Major party nominees such as Bacon and Eastman expect endorsements from party standard-bearers. It's often bigger news when someone withholds an expected endorsement, political observers said. That's why some still ask about the endorsement plans of the Democrat who finished second to Eastman in this spring's primary, lawyer Ann Ashford. She didn't immediately support Eastman.

Endorsements matter most during contested party primaries, not general elections, said Randall Adkins, a political science professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, citing national research. In general, these public pledges of support serve as cues to voters and political donors, he said, separating candidates by showing voters which people or groups they support.

Endorsements from people or groups that typically support one party but buck tradition to support a candidate from another often have the biggest impact, said Rod Edwards, a Nebraska political consultant.

Timing also matters in endorsements, Adkins said, particularly for fundraising. For instance, Obama backed Eastman in his first wave of endorsements this year for the Nov. 3 election, a signal to supporters that the former president thinks she can win. In 2018, Obama waited until October to endorse Eastman, a sign that his endorsement that year was more perfunctory, people who follow local, state and national politics told The World-Herald.

Eastman, through a spokesman, said she was pleased that Obama and his team see potential in her bid.

"This shows that Democrats from across the spectrum support my candidacy," she said.

Bacon campaign spokesman Kyle Clark said Obama's endorsement can't mask Bacon's support from centrist and center-right Democrats. Bacon has argued that he's more bipartisan.

Some endorsements cut both ways, Adkins and others said.

Several pointed to Eastman's endorsements from the progressive wing of her party, including Justice Democrats, and Bacon's from Trump and, previously, Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, as examples. King, defeated in Iowa's June primary, had been marginalized in the House over comments widely condemned as racist.

Bacon himself said he appreciates the president's endorsement and asked whether Eastman is still proud of her endorsement from "The Squad," a group of far-left first-term female House members. "Does she still think the president should be arrested for treason?" Bacon asked.

Eastman's campaign manager, Dave Pantos, said Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and poor planning for an economic recovery will be hard for Bacon to shake.

Endorsements and how campaigns unveil them often tell a story. They help reveal a narrative that candidates and campaigns want voters to absorb about a race, political consultants said.

One example: Bacon in 2019 was the first member of Nebraska's GOP-led federal delegation to endorse Trump's reelection bid, a primary season signal to Republican voters of his party loyalty.

Trump returned the favor this spring, endorsing Bacon by tweet, which allowed the retired Air Force brigadier general to solidify his base before the fall contest in Nebraska's politically split 2nd District.
Bacon's campaign then spent the late spring and summer rolling out endorsements from centrist and conservative Democrats, including former Republicans like 2018 gubernatorial candidate Bob Krist.
They also started rolling out a series of individual union endorsements, including the Omaha Police Officers Association and local carpenters and steamfitters.
The reason: They want to reinforce their assertion that Eastman's political stances are too progressive to represent the Omaha area. Endorsements from labor help them paint a picture of broader support.
Eastman, a nonprofit consultant, did something similar with her endorsements. She differentiated herself in the primary by unveiling endorsements from Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.
As she did in 2018, Eastman received backing from several national progressive groups happy that she embraces Jayapal's "Medicare for All" plan to address some shortcomings of American health care.
But Eastman stopped short of publicly endorsing Bernie Sanders' presidential bid, instead attending a rally of his in Iowa and advertising online to Sanders' supporters. She eventually endorsed Biden.
Her campaign began discussing the labor endorsements she did receive, including from AFSCME, the union that represents public employees that work for cities, counties and municipalities.
Eastman spoke openly about the need to woo political centrists and independents and not simply rely on her 2018 model of turning out Democrats who vote less frequently.
Reality, unlike both campaigns' narratives, is more complicated. Democratic primary voters overwhelmingly rejected two centrist Democrats in the 2020 primary, giving Eastman a boost.
Eastman's campaign points to the recent endorsements of two former Ashford supporters, former Gov. Bob Kerrey and former U.S. Rep. John Delaney of Maryland, as evidence that the party is unifying behind her.
But an undercurrent lingers within the old guard of the Nebraska Democratic Party that says, much as Ashford did during the primary, that Eastman may go too far left politically for their taste.
It resembles a similar strain within the Nebraska Republican Party of people who cannot accept Bacon's reliable support for Trump, whom some Republicans now oppose.
Ashford, a former Republican, said she cannot support Eastman. Her reasons go beyond policy: She did not appreciate Eastman discounting her in public forums by calling her "Brad Ashford's wife."
Brad Ashford was the last Democrat to represent the Omaha area in Congress. He lost to Bacon in 2016 and fell short of a possible rematch in the 2018 Democratic primary, losing to Eastman.
Ann Ashford said she also believes Eastman's campaign used a digital list of her husband's campaign donors that a former employee brought to Eastman's campaign. She said it should've been returned.
Ashford said she would not support Bacon, either, this fall. She said he's been too supportive of Trump.
Her husband, Brad, said he will support neither Eastman nor Bacon because Omaha needs a centrist who puts the district first, regardless of party or policy preference.
Eastman's campaign has said it didn't use the donor list but did not address either Ashford directly. The campaign said its aim is to focus voters on beating Bacon, not past disputes.
Roll Call on Thursday listed Bacon as the sixth-most vulnerable House incumbent, saying Eastman has secured the support of outside groups that largely sat out her 2018 race.
Its prediction for the race says the Omaha area still leans Republican, saying that Eastman needs to raise more money and that her support of Medicare for All could be a liability in Omaha, an insurance town.
Eastman, after receiving Obama's endorsement, pivoted quickly to raise money off of the announcement, much as Bacon did in May after securing Trump's backing.

By Aaron Sanderford

AP: Obama's Medicaid expansion gainsground

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is still trying to overturn Obamacare, but his predecessor's health care law keeps gaining ground in places where it was once unwelcome.
Missouri voters last week approved Medicaid expansion by a 53% to 47% margin, making the conservative state the seventh to do so under Trump. The Republican president readily carried Missouri in 2016, but the Medicaid vote comes as more people have been losing workplace health insurance in a treacherous coronavirus economy.
That leaves only a dozen states opposed to using the federal-state health program for low-income people as a vehicle for covering more adults, mainly people in jobs that don't provide health care.
Medicaid expansion is a central feature of former President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, covering about 12 million people, while nearly 10 million others get subsidized private insurance.
If current trends continue, it's only a matter of time until all states expandMedicaid, said Brian Blase, a former health care adviser in the Trump White House, who remains opposed to the expansion.
"Medicaid expansion is terrible policy, but it is attractive to states because it's almost all federal spending, and the insurance companies and hospitals get lots of dollars when a state expands Medicaid," he said.
The federal government pays 90% of the cost of covering people through the expansion, a much higher matching share than for low-income disabled and elderly people traditionally covered by Medicaid.
Blase argues that's an incentive to waste federal dollars. Before the ACA most low-income adults couldn't get Medicaid unless they were caring for children.
"There's lots of political pressure to expand," Blase said. "Eventually all states are going to expand unless the enhanced (federal) match rate changes."
Voters in another conservative state — Oklahoma — approved a Medicaid expansion this year, although the margin was much closer than in Missouri. Of the seven states that have expanded Medicaid in the Trump years, six have done so by referendum, said Rachel Garfield, a policy expert with the Kaiser Family Foundation.
"This is an indication that there is large popular support for providing health care coverage for low-income people, and it is quite possible that this support has increased given what's going on with the pandemic," Garfield said.
The six states where voters have approved Medicaid expansion in the Trump years are Idaho, Maine, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Utah. Nebraska has finally started signups after nearly two years since approval. In Virginia, the legislature passed a Medicaid expansion after Democrats made political gains.
"That has been an interesting feature of the Trump administration, that momentum among the states to expand Medicaid has not slowed down," said Jesse CrossCall, a policy expert with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
Trump is trying to persuade the Supreme Court to toss out Obamacare, but as long as it remains the law his administration has to carry out expansions that states approve. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden would ask Congress to provide coverage where states have refused.
In Missouri, support for Medicaid expansion in cities and suburbs overcame opposition in rural communities. Supporters used the pandemic to highlight the need for health care. The Missouri Chamber of Commerce and Industry, one of the state's most influential business groups, also pushed for expansion as a way of helping the economy recover.

Cindy Mann, who ran Medicaid under Obama, argues that there's also a strong fairness argument for expansion. About 4.5 million poor adults live in states that have resisted expanding Medicaid. But because of the way the Obama health law is written, they don't qualify for subsidized private insurance through marketplaces like HealthCare.gov and they're stuck in a coverage gap.
"Those are a lot of the so-called essential workers, if we think about it through the COVID lens," she said. "It's a really inequitable story and one that increasingly can't be tolerated by the public."

OWH: As lawmakers continue to spar, second round of pandemic relief remains in limbo

WASHINGTON — Republican senators from Iowa and Nebraska were pointing fingers across the aisle last week when asked about the lack of progress on a new round of pandemic relief.
Democrats have noted the House passed its legislation months ago, while the Senate hasn't even taken votes on the latest round of stimulus measures.
But Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., said her side wanted to wait and see what was and wasn't working from previous efforts that appropriated trillions of dollars.
"I think the answer is to find the programs that are effective, find the programs that are needed, find how we can truly offer relief to families and individuals and businesses, but then get on the road to recovery," Fischer told The World-Herald.
Democrats have criticized President Donald Trump and his administration for his handling of the pandemic, but Fischer said that in her opinion "they've done a good job."
One main sticking point between the parties: the $600-a-week federal unemployment benefits that recently expired. Democrats want to keep that level while Republicans have argued that serves as a disincentive for people to return to work.
Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said Democrats want to spend too much.
"We don't think you need $3 trillion to do it, that we can do a pretty good job with $1 trillion," Grassley said.
Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, said, "We are ready to negotiate. They are not willing to do so."
In the midst of the deadlock, Fischer introduced legislation aimed at making it easier to access federal grants related to mental health, given the rise in anxiety and depression in the face of the virus.
One note of bipartisan accomplishment is the Great American Outdoors Act, which was signed into law last week by Trump.
Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., has been a chief proponent of the new conservation measure and scored a coveted invitation to the signing ceremony. There was one minor hiccup, however, when the White House identified Fortenberry as a representative of Louisiana.
In other news:
Calming vaccine fears
Scientists are working hard to develop a vaccine that will help stop the spread of the coronavirus and protect the most vulnerable. But many Americans have indicated they won't take the vaccine. Some have even expressed concern that the government might try to mandate vaccinations.
During a telephone town hall last week, Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., was asked whether he would support military-enforced mandatory vaccinations. The retired Air Force brigadier general said he would not, but he also talked about the importance of people getting the vaccinations.
"As a military guy, I have had every vaccine you could possibly get," Bacon said. "I've been through the line where you're getting shot in both arms and I think it has contributed to good health."
He said "there's always some risk" but that the greater risk would be in people not being vaccinated

against the virus.
“I hope we can produce a vaccine for COVID-19, and I’ll volunteer to take it when my time is right,” Bacon said, referring to the fact that he’s not among the most vulnerable who should get priority.
Sarah’s Law blocked
Both of Iowa’s senators were on the Senate floor last week attempting unsuccessfully to pass what is known as Sarah’s Law, a bill that would require federal immigration officials to detain individuals in the country illegally and charged with crimes resulting in death or serious bodily injury.
The proposal is named for Sarah Root, 21, who had just graduated from Bellevue University when she was killed in a crash in Omaha. Authorities say Eswin Mejia was in the country illegally and drag racing while intoxicated when he caused that crash. Mejia was arrested but disappeared after being released on bail. He remains at large.
Ernst said the bill “recognizes the simple fact that all criminals should be held accountable for their actions and not simply allowed to slip back into the shadows.”
Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., blocked the bill’s passage. Udall offered his condolences to the Root family and said that he has worked in a bipartisan fashion to stop drunken driving.
But he said Ernst’s bill would do nothing to improve the immigration system.
Rather, he said it would impose a “judicially unreviewable” detention on immigrants who had been charged but not convicted — an approach he described as inconsistent with due process.
“This bill uses a tragedy to paint immigrants as more dangerous than other people, which is false by all available data,” Udall said.
White House acceptance speech
As both parties prepare for their nominating conventions later this month, Iowa finds itself once again defending its first-in-the-nation caucus status.
And with both gatherings expected to be largely virtual, the two nominees are looking for venues from which to deliver their acceptance speeches remotely.
Trump has suggested he could deliver his speech from the White House itself — a move critics say would be inappropriate.
Ernst said she doesn’t think Trump should deliver his speech at the White House and floated an alternative location — Des Moines.
“Of course we could really use that economic boom,” Ernst told reporters. “Just send President Trump in and we’ll find a place for him to give his acceptance speech.”
By Joseph Morton

AP: Control dispute brews over mask mandates in Iowa

The refusal of Gov. Kim Reynolds to require Iowans to wear masks in public has prompted at least three cities and a county to adopt their own local ordinances, setting up what could be a legal battle over whether local officials have the authority to impose mask rules in the absence of a governor's mandate.
Local government control also has become an issue in Iowa as a few school boards have said they may refuse to abide by Reynolds' demands to send students back to classrooms if they feel it's unsafe because of the spread of the coronavirus.
A court has not yet been asked to resolve the standoffs between Reynolds and local officials, but that appears likely as some local mask ordinances are set to take effect Monday.
Reynolds on Thursday again asserted that she thinks cities and counties cannot implement mask orders unless she says they can.

"We don't believe during a public health emergency that the local governments have the authority to supersede what has been put in place at the statewide level by the governor," she said, adding that she has consulted with the attorney general on the matter.
The Attorney General's Office in March provided Reynolds with an analysis of home rule in Iowa.
"While cities and counties have police powers to protect the health and safety of their citizens, the state has the authority to declare and coordinate the response to a public health disaster," Assistant Attorney General Heather Adams wrote in a message to Reynolds' legal staff.
In June, the Attorney General's Office wrote an informal advice letter on local mask actions to Sen. Zach Wahls. The letter said that if a local regulation isn't preempted by the governor's proclamation, local jurisdictions could adopt regulations "not inconsistent with law and the rules of the state board, as may be necessary for the protection and improvement of the public health."
Thursday night, the Dubuque City Council unanimously passed a mask ordinance that will be enforced beginning Monday.
"I think this is a life and death public safety and public health issue that nobody else has addressed so it depends on us," Councilman Rick Jones said.
City Attorney Crenna Brumwell told the council that she thought Iowa's home rule constitutional amendment passed in 1968 gives cities power to pass local regulations not inconsistent with state law. She said no analysis has been done to find mask ordinances inconsistent.
Mount Vernon passed a resolution on Tuesday, Muscatine passed an ordinance on July 6 and the Iowa City mayor signed a proclamation requiring face coverings in public places in July.
The Johnson County Board passed a face covering regulation on Thursday that is scheduled to go into effect on Monday. Iowa City is in Johnson County.
"I get that people feel they have freedoms," the Iowa City Press-Citizen quoted board member Janelle Rettig as saying on Thursday, "but that alsomeans you feel like you have the freedom to drive drunk or to drive a bus on drugs. I mean, sometimes your freedom ends when you can kill other people, and this is that case."
The board in Story County, home to Ames and Iowa State University, is scheduled to consider a mask resolution on Tuesday after the County Board of Health voted last week to recommend a countywide mask requirement.
ISU students are returning to campus, and the university reported Friday that 66 students moving onto campus housing tested positive for the coronavirus.
Reynolds has encouraged Iowans to wear amask when they cannot stay a safe distance from others in public places andhas said businesses, schools, and government officials can require masks inside their buildings.
"I just don't believe that a one-size-fits-all from a government mandate is the right direction," she said.
However, her policy requiring local school officials to resume in-class instruction is a state mandate. Reynolds has interpreted a law passed by the Legislature that says learning should be primarily in classrooms and not online to mean schools must be in classrooms for at least 50% of their instruction time this year. She also requires districts to ask the state for permission to send kids home when their county reaches a 15% or higher positivity rate for the virus and 10% of students in a school are out sick. A few districts have said they may not abide by those requirements if they feel local conditions merit sending children home to be safe.
The state's largest district, in DesMoines, initially planned to begin the year with online learning, but it is reassessing plans after Reynolds threatened to take disciplinary action against school administrators who defy her. She said he would force districts to make up any instruction days the state hasn't authorized outside the classroom.

LA Times: U.S. virus cases exceed 5 million

WASHINGTON — As the United States surpassed 5 million confirmed coronavirus cases, President Donald Trump's senior aides on Sunday defended his handling of intertwined economic and public health crises, saying Democrats would bear the blame for millions of Americans' financial distress if lawmakers challenged Trump's new directives on pandemic relief.

Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi denounced the orders unveiled by Trump on Saturday at his New Jersey golf resort as "meager, weak and unconstitutional." In interviews on Sunday news shows, she did not say whether Democrats would go to court to try to overturn the measures but urged a return to negotiations on the more than $3 trillion relief package passed by the House in May.

"We have to reach an agreement," Pelosi said on "Fox News Sunday."

The Republican plan, much smaller at $1 trillion, rejects many of the key House provisions, including aid to states whose budgets have been ravaged by the virus and a continuation of a $600-a-week enhanced jobless benefit. Talks by the two sides broke down last week.

Pelosi and other senior Democrats suggested that the president's attempts to unilaterally chart spending and tax policy — normally the purview of Congress — might well fall apart on their own, as top Trump lieutenants struggled to explain the envisioned mechanisms for carrying out the president's wishes, at times contradicting one another.

Larry Kudlow, director of the White House National Economic Council, acknowledged that states had not committed to making up a $100 share of the $400 enhanced unemployment benefit the president announced, as Trump suggested they would.

"We will probably find that out today and tomorrow as we make our canvass — we have been in touch with them," he said on CNN's "State of the Union."

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, on "Fox News Sunday," said states would be able to move immediately to set up new unemployment insurance provisions, but Kudlow indicated that the timing was unclear. Separately, Kudlow equivocated when pressed in the CNN interview as to whether Trump's order would actually freeze evictions, as the president said it would. Democrats say the actual order only calls for a review of the issue.

"We're setting up a process, a mechanism, OK?" he said. "I can't predict the future altogether."

One of the thornier questions for Trump's surrogates was the future of Social Security and Medicare, which are funded by payroll taxes that the president announced he was deferring for Americans earning less than $100,000 a year until year's end. Trump also said, if reelected, he would seek to abolish the payroll tax altogether.

Mnuchin, on Fox, said lost revenue from payroll taxes would not imperil Social Security and Medicare because the money would be made up from elsewhere.

Trump's economic advisor, Peter Navarro, appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press," brushed aside questions raised by Democrats and even some Republicans about the legality of the president's directives. Nebraska GOP Sen. Ben Sasse called the executive actions "unconstitutional slop."

"I'm confident that every single one of these orders, which cleared through the Office of Legal Counsel, will stand up," Navarro said. Administration officials sought Sunday to spotlight what they described as positive news on the pandemic front in the U.S. — which leads the world in officially reported deaths from the virus at more than 160,000.

"The president is going to probably be able to get one or more vaccines by the end of the year," Navarro said.

Trump's national security adviser, Robert O'Brien, who said he had recovered from the virus, described

the state of testing in the United States as a "miracle."
But Scott Gottlieb, a former Food and Drug Administration commissioner, predicted on CBS that, by the end of the year, U.S. deaths would be somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000.

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