

Nebraska State and Legislative Actions:

Emergency Appropriation

Nebraska lawmakers reconvened Monday afternoon to pass emergency funding to address COVID-19. The appropriation is \$25 million more than Gov. Ricketts' earlier request of \$58.6 million. Lawmakers decided over the weekend to include the extra \$25 million as "just in case" funds. Included in the appropriation¹ now totaling \$83,619,600:

- **DHHS Public Health Local Response Efforts - \$38,156,700**

This will provide additional funding for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other supplies to local jurisdictions, and support to local health departments for staffing, PPE, call centers, information technology needs including additional laptops/servers, and other essential expenditures.

- **DHHS Staffing - \$4,004,000**

Due to the size of the response and need to cover response needs, additional staffing expenditures are needed to cover costs for overtime and additional staff. The areas that need immediate surge and sustained staffing are epidemiology, support services (administrative, communications, and data entry), emergency preparedness, and contracts for staffing in epidemiology to meet the increased demands of the Division of Public Health.

- **Surge Staffing for Veterans Hospitals & DHHS Care Facilities - \$13,000,000**

Additional staffing expenditures are needed to cover costs for overtime and additional staff to maintain facility healthcare coverage needs. The areas that need immediate surge and sustained staffing at veterans' homes and DHHS care facilities including nursing, administrative, and other health care professionals.

- **UNMC COVID-19 Lab Testing - \$515,000**

This would augment the cost of the reagents, laboratory personnel, and equipment to conduct the COVID-19 lab testing for the state. This would include funds to purchase a combined sample extraction/detection robot for efficient and accurate serial processing of specimens, reducing staffing needs.

- **Lab Equipment, Software Programming and Personnel - \$2,500,000**

The equipment includes higher throughput automated equipment for microbiology and molecular diagnostics. The increased testing throughput will be implemented on a fast track within the next 2-4 weeks. All funds would be dedicated to support statewide needs.

- **UV Light Boxes - \$100,000**

As PPE become more difficult to obtain through supply chains, we anticipate the need to use UV light boxes to provide tertiary cleaning of N95 respirators for reuse by healthcare workers. Initially, one unit and one light meter (measures device effectiveness), eventually 100 units/10 meters for distribution to hub hospitals.

- **Knowledge Center - \$343,900**

This system is used by coalitions and all stakeholders across the state to establish an interoperable platform for communication, bed tracking, resource sharing, and an overall interoperable platform. Stakeholders include PH, Healthcare, EMS, and Emergency Management for varying counties as well as State entities.

¹ <https://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/106/PDF/AM/AM2976.pdf>

- **Ready Reserve- \$25,000,000:** Unobligated reserve amount in the event additional funds are necessary

Lawmakers advanced the appropriation on a 44-0 vote with no substantive debate. Senator Bolz spoke as Vice Chair of Appropriations stating her intent that federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) like One World and Charles Drew as well as long-term care facilities that serve Medicaid patients receive priority in the awarding of funds. Because bills must lay over a day between the second and third round of debate, senators will meet for a check-in day, before taking a final vote on the bill Wednesday afternoon.

Governor Update

Gov. Pete Ricketts began his press conference on Monday by thanking Nebraskans for their hard work in limiting the spread of coronavirus. Ricketts announced that Nebraska would be postponing its tax filing deadline to reflect the Federal date of July 15. Ricketts encouraged Nebraskans not impacted by COVID-19 to still file their taxes by April 15. He said if everyone waits, it'll cause \$385 million of tax receipts to move into the next fiscal year.

Ricketts also announced that there were some mistakes in applications for unemployment, based on newly waived requirements. If anyone was denied, people are encouraged to re-apply, he said. Joining Gov. Ricketts was Director of Administrative Services Jason Jackson. Jackson stated that his office is working with unions and department leadership to be as flexible as possible for employees in relation to vacation leave, sick leave, advancing sick or vacation leave, and paid on call status. Jackson said he hopes Nebraska agencies will be able to strike a balance between delivery of services and keeping employees safe, while limiting unnecessary economic disruptions to families.

Also joining Gov. Ricketts was Green Plains CEO Todd Becker. Beginning tomorrow, Green Plains will be donating alcohol produced at its York ethanol plant to Nebraska Department of Corrections through a public-private partnership. Becker announced NDOC will then make hand sanitizer out of the alcohol to use within its facilities and elsewhere throughout the state.

During Q&A, Ricketts was asked if the state had been considering any spaces to quarantine people who wouldn't be able to safely do so at home. He responded saying the state is looking at possible quarantine sites. Ricketts was also asked about issuing a shelter in place order like other states. He said through the other measures Nebraska has taken, like limiting restaurant dining and closing bars, that Nebraskans have slowed the spreading of the virus. Ricketts also noted that Nebraska's lack of interface with China, as opposed to cities like New York, has given the state more time to prepare for the arrival of the virus. Ricketts stated attempts to expand testing across the state were underway, however that would ultimately depend on the industrial capacity in the United States for test manufacturers. Tests will remain prioritized for those who are considered vulnerable to the virus, first responders, and healthcare workers. Finally, Ricketts was asked if he plans to call on the National Guard should it be needed, and Ricketts said he doesn't deal in hypotheticals. He said there have been no discussions of martial law, however.

Ricketts will host his next press conference at 2 pm CT on Tuesday.

Medicaid Providers

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services has announced it will be holding a weekly conference call on Tuesdays during the COVID-19 outbreak for Medicaid providers.² The calls will provide updates on steps Nebraska Medicaid is taking in response to current events. If you'd like to join, you can call in at: 888-820-1398, attendee code: 8559164#.

² <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Medicaid-Providers.aspx>

Federal:

Special Enrollment Being Considered

White House officials are considering launching a special open enrollment period to allow people to sign up for health insurance through the Affordable Care Act amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine states that run their own exchanges for healthcare have signaled they would let people sign up for coverage pending federal approval.³ “CMS is evaluating offering a Special Enrollment Period specifically designated for COVID-19,” a spokeswoman said.

Senate

Senate failed to advance an economic stimulus plan for the second time in 24 hours. On Monday afternoon, the bill was stuck with only 49 senators voting ‘Ay’, and 46 remaining firm in opposition. The delay appears to concern the roughly \$500 billion in funds for loans and loan guarantees for distressed companies, states and localities.⁴

Senate Democrats argued there weren’t enough guidelines or oversight, and that the legislation didn’t do enough to help the American people. The stimulus bill being considered is likely to be the most significant legislative response to fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic so far. Lawmakers have already passed two other major relief packages in response to the outbreak, and the current legislation is being referred to as "phase three" in the legislative response. In the midst of the bill being deadlocked in the Senate, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced Monday afternoon that the House would be introducing the Take Responsibilities for Workers and Families Act.⁵ Senate debate continued into Monday evening, with negotiations continuing.

³ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/us-considers-special-enrollment-period-for-affordable-care-act-due-to-coronavirus-spread/ar-BB11vSac>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/23/politics/coronavirus-economic-stimulus-senate/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/32320>