

CONQUERING THE QUARTERFINALS

Davies, West Fargo advance in Class A volleyball tourney, SPORTS

The Forum

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Sanford CEO: I got COVID-19, so I don't have to wear a mask

By **Jeremy Fugleberg**
Forum News Service

SIoux FALLS, S.D. — The president and CEO of one of the nation's largest nonprofit health systems says he won't be wearing a mask at work because he's recovered from COVID-19, and doing so would only be a "symbolic gesture" because he considers himself immune from the virus.



Krabbenhoft

Kelby Krabbenhoft of South Dakota-based Sanford Health laid out his thoughts about having COVID-19, and why he wouldn't be wearing a mask, in an email sent to health system employees late Wednesday afternoon, Nov. 18, and obtained from multiple sources by Forum News Service.

Krabbenhoft said he is still experiencing "lagging coughs and fatigue," but told employees he was back in the office — without a mask.

"For me to wear a mask defies the efficacy and purpose of a mask and sends an untruthful message that I am susceptible to infection or could transmit it," he said. "I have no interest in using masks as a symbolic gesture when I

consider that my actions in support of our family leave zero doubt as to my support of all 50,000 of you. My team and I have a duty to express the truth and facts and reality and not feed the opposite."

Krabbenhoft's 1,000-word email provides a unique window into the thinking of the leader of the large health system, which has notably not joined cross-town rival Avera Health in supporting a public mask mandate in Sioux Falls, its hometown, even as local and statewide COVID-19 hospitalizations have surged.

Sanford Health employs about 48,000 and has major medical centers and more than 200 clinics in South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota.

Krabbenhoft, who is not a doctor, based his defense of his decision not to wear a mask on his view that he's developed an immunity to COVID-19.

"The information, science, truth, advice and growing evidence is that I am immune for at least seven months and perhaps for years to come, similar to that of chicken pox, measles, etc.," he wrote, without specifying sources for his claim.

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Photos by Kyle Martin / The Forum

Dr. Casmir Nwaigwe, an infectious disease specialist at Trinity Health in Minot, N.D., has emerged as a leading voice of the state's medical community during the pandemic.

DARK DAYS

How Minot became the COVID-19 capital of North Dakota

By **Adam Willis**
awillis@forumcomm.com

Minot, N.D.

From his desk at Trinity Health in Minot, Dr. Casmir Nwaigwe sat at the center of one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the world.

Like most North Dakota cities, Minot passed through the spring and summer of the pandemic largely unconcerned about the virus that was tearing through distant and more densely populated regions of the country.

Still, Nwaigwe, an infectious disease specialist, worried from the time of the state's first positive

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Wes Burkart, director of Thompson-Larson Funeral Home in Minot, N.D., said his facility has retrofitted a room to accommodate the high volume of dead bodies during the coronavirus surge.

Western ND Republicans appoint Delzer to House seat

Supreme Court to hear case over deceased candidate's seat today

By **Adam Willis**
awillis@forumcomm.com

BISMARCK — The North Dakota Supreme Court is slated to hear oral arguments Friday, Nov. 20, in the heated, three-way dispute over a House seat left vacant by the election of a candidate who has died from COVID-19. But while the fate of the vacancy remains in the hands of

the court, district Republicans moved ahead Wednesday night to appoint a rival of Gov. Doug Burgum to the seat.

In a 17-1 vote, members of the District 8 Republican Party's Executive Committee appointed Rep. Jeff Delzer, R-Underwood, to fill the vacancy created by the election of David Andahl, who died of COVID-19 on Oct. 5 but still



Delzer

move forward with plans that predated the legal battle over the seat.

Their move comes just a day after the Supreme Court contest gained a third player, as justices granted Democrat Kathrin Volochenko's

motion to intervene. Volochenko argued that she has claim to the vacant seat as the third highest vote recipient in the District 8 race, coming in behind Republicans Dave Nehring and Andahl.

The appointment of Delzer, a longtime lawmaker and current District 8 representative who chairs the state's powerful House Appropriations Committee, is the latest in a winding saga that played out in the wake of Andahl's death.

Following the candidate's death in early October, Secre-

tary of State Al Jaeger sought an opinion from Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem to clear up confusion about who would have the authority to fill the vacant seat in the event of an Andahl win. Stenehjem backed Jaeger's initial position, ruling that the vacancy should be filled by the District 8 Republican Party.

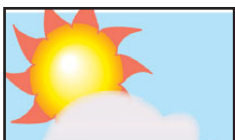
In defiance of the attorney general, Gov. Doug Burgum intervened hours after Andahl's election to appoint

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Today's weather



32°
18°

Partly cloudy
Details, D4



LIFE: With no touring, The Blenders bring concerts home for fans, **PAGE B1**

ND schools may be sanctioned for violating mask mandate

By **Michelle Griffith**
mgriffith@forumcomm.com

BISMARCK — After some North Dakota school districts publicly said they will not enforce the new statewide mask mandate, the Department of Public Instruction is doubling down and saying schools must follow the order.

School districts are required to comply with state and federal laws, meaning the new order must be followed in school settings, according

to Kirsten Baesler, North Dakota's superintendent of public instruction. The order, aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19, says all people in public indoor settings must wear a face covering, and in outdoor settings when a social distance of 6 feet cannot be maintained.

Carolyn Eide, superintendent of Tioga Public Schools, said many students and teachers in the district do not

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C.S. Hagen / The Forum

Lewis and Clark Elementary School para-educator Aalia Abdullah signs a steel beam planned for use in the school's expansion on Oct. 13 in Fargo, as students wait in the background. The teachers and children wore masks while awaiting their turns to sign.

Active COVID-19 cases rise in ND, hospitalizations fall

COVID-19 IN OUR REGION

North Dakota totals

New cases: 1,386

Active cases: 9,977 (+154 on 11/19)

Positivity rate: 14.59%

Currently hospitalized: 276

Deaths: 795 (+10)

Cass County totals

New cases: 302

Active cases: 1,703 (+95)

Active per 10K: 94

Deaths: 112 (+0)

Minnesota totals

New cases: 7,877

Deaths: 3,082 (+72)

Clay County totals

New cases: 118

Deaths: 51 (+0)

Forum Design Center

By Adam Willis
Forum News Service

BISMARCK — With North Dakota leading the nation's surging COVID-19 outbreak, 60 medical personnel from the U.S. Air Force have been deployed to help relieve the state's hospital staffing crisis.

The team consists primarily of nurses and will divide into specialty units to assist medical centers in Minot, Bismarck, Fargo and Grand Forks. The relief effort comes after the Federal Emergency Management Agency fulfilled an aid request submitted by Gov. Doug Burgum, according to a Thursday,

Nov. 19, news release.

In addition to the military nurses, the Department of Health contracted with a temporary staffing agency that will provide another 60 civilian nurses for work in hospitals and nursing homes beginning this weekend.

In a further sign of the state's overburdened health care system, Sanford announced earlier this week that it is preparing a 20-bed COVID surge unit to be staffed by traveling nurses. The facility is expected to open next week.

The Air Force personnel will be deployed to North Dakota on Saturday and are expected to begin

work in major hospitals early next week, joining 167 nurses in the Department of Health's COVID response team. The new arrivals will help staff Trinity hospital in Minot, Sanford and CHI St. Alexius in Bismarck, Altru Health in Grand Forks, and the Sanford and Essentia hospitals in Fargo.

North Dakota's strained hospital system cleared some new space in its COVID-19 units this week as virus hospitalizations dropped for the fourth day in a row Thursday, descending to 276 people. But even with the recent dip, COVID hospitalizations have converged

with strains on health care staffing and high noncoronavirus admissions, leaving the state with an extreme shortage of staffed beds.

Some of the hospitals awaiting reinforcements were almost completely exhausted of staffed ICU beds on Thursday morning.

Active cases climb again

North Dakota reported 10 new COVID-19 deaths on Thursday as a large batch of new positive tests brought active cases back above 10,000.

And as a fall wave of the pandemic has shattered previous national

new case records in the last three weeks, North Dakota has held its place as the worst per capita outbreak in the country.

The 10 deaths recorded in the Department of Health's latest report came from eight different counties, with single deaths in Bottineau, McIntosh, Mountrail, Pembina, Sioux and Stutsman counties, and two deaths in each Burleigh and Ward counties.

On Thursday, the Department of Health reported 1,386 new COVID positives, for 10,131 active cases statewide.

Readers can reach reporter Adam Willis, a Report for America corps member, at awillis@forumcomm.com.

DARK DAYS

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case of COVID-19, registered outside Minot in March, that his city in north-central North Dakota could be in for a long road.

For weeks, Nwaigwe urged his neighbors and patients to take the virus seriously, emerging as a leading medical critic of North Dakota's slow-footed response. In the last month, the doctor's warnings have become reality. Since Oct. 1, Minot's surrounding Ward County has ballooned from 174 active virus cases to a peak of nearly 1,400 last week. Before the start of October, the county had reported just 11 virus deaths. Since then, 94 more people have died.

This recent viral surge has put Ward County at the head of North Dakota's outbreak. Of the state's seven most populous counties, Ward has the densest concentration of active virus cases, at 163 for every 10,000 residents. Minot has become a paragon of North Dakota's pandemic crisis: a nightmare nexus of virus skepticism, underestimated rural spread, delayed action and an overburdened hospital system.

While larger North Dakota cities have managed to keep barely afloat thanks in part to bigger medical systems — Bismarck has two hospitals and Fargo has three — Minot has nearly buckled under the staffing pressures forced onto its only hospital. While the city is home to about 50,000 people, Trinity serves a vast swath of northern North Dakota, sometimes accepting patients from as far away as eastern Montana, a total coverage area that Dr. Jeffrey Sather, the hospital's chief of staff, estimated reaches close to five times Minot's population.

To accommodate the recent surge, Trinity converted a full floor and a half into a COVID-19 unit. In recent weeks, Sather said, the hospital has been on diversion more than off, meaning that it has most often been too full to accept transfers from rural hospitals in the surrounding area. The virus has also gutted the hospital's front-line roster and exacerbated staffing shortages: At one point in early November, close to 140 Trinity staffers were out on quarantine.

"I have to watch someone suffocate to death every day, sometimes multiple times a day," Sather said in an emotional press conference earlier this month, describing how the hospital's staffing crunch had left patients waiting outside the emergency division, unable to receive care.

Nwaigwe, who has worked at the hospital for 12 years, said some of his longtime patients are among the dead. "I feel it personally," he said.

"When I say that every death from this is a preventable death, I mean it," he added. "Every single one."

Funeral home pushing its limit

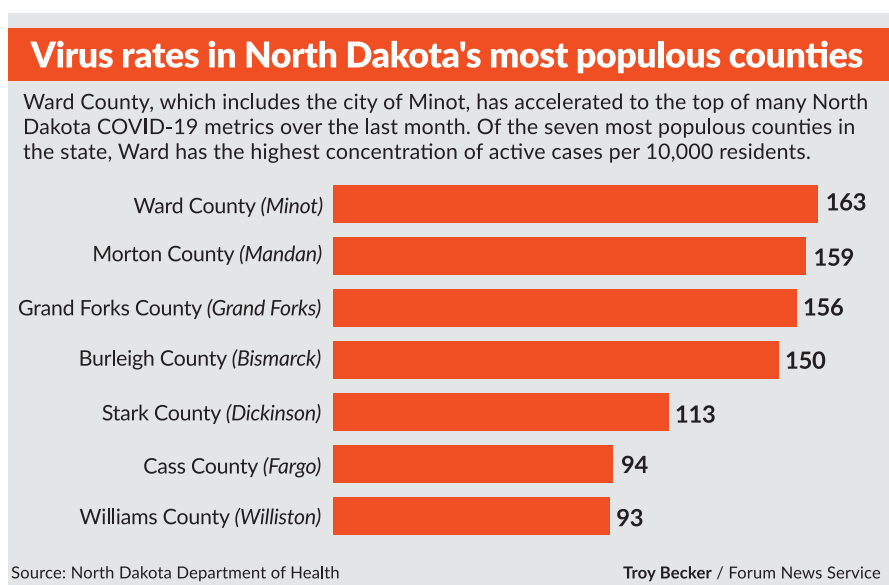
Among the North Dakota cities that enacted mask mandates, Minot did so relatively early, installing an unenforced directive almost four weeks before the statewide mandate. But convincing people in town to take the virus seriously was difficult, even as Ward County began to regularly register new virus cases in the triple digits.

"We're at the point that we didn't want it to get to," said Jennifer Weichmann, the county's emergency management director.

Schatz Crossroads, a 24-hour truck stop and a Minot institution, remains a watering hole for locals, many of whom haven't gotten on board with masking guidelines.

"A lot of people that probably fight it — a majority of them are probably our customers," said Krista Marshall, the operations manager at the truck stop. While Schatz removed tables and required employees to wear masks in response to the recent surge, Marshall said she isn't eager to police her customers. Schatz is the sort of place that Minot old-timers have long frequented for comfort meals and familiar faces. Some regulars still stop in for their scheduled meetings with friends. "I feel for them," Marshall said. "You can set a clock to some of it."

Still, Marshall said she's seen a shift in Minot in recent weeks, as the local case numbers and virus deaths have become unavoidable. It seems like practically everyone in town knows somebody who has lost a loved one, Marshall said. Just that morning, one Schatz



employee's father died from the virus.

For Thompson-Larson Funeral Home, a family-owned facility abutting the hospital downtown, the death toll has been almost too much to handle. Wes Burkart, the home's funeral director, said the recent COVID-19 surge has coincided with a rash of overdoses in the area and brought in business at levels they have never seen before. Thompson-Larson staffers are working long, taxing hours with almost no reprieve, and logistical challenges of handling COVID-19 victims' bodies and arranging safe funerals has stretched them even further.

"It's terrible. I'm coming in to work at 6, 6:15, and I'm leaving at 8:30 or 9 o'clock at night and probably not taking supper," Burkart said. "You're just going, trying to get paperwork done and other stuff. There's just a lot of stuff behind the scenes that has to be done."

In non-pandemic times, Burkart estimated that Thompson-Larson holds close to 30 funerals a month. But recently the funeral home had 30 funerals on its immediate docket, a schedule they hoped to clear within a week. For now, Thompson-Larson has been shipping in caskets in record quantities for the small facility, and just last week, the funeral home staff retrofitted a storage area into additional morgue space.

If the local outbreak doesn't subside soon, Weichmann said Ward County may have to take extraordinary measures to handle the volume of deaths. The emergency management director has been at the ready to request a refrigerated mobile morgue truck from the state Department of Health if the local funeral homes need it, a last-resort step that North Dakota has so

far managed to avoid.

And while Weichmann is hopeful that Minot will escape without the need for such a drastic step, she worries that, for many people in her county, the pandemic remains a clash of individual rights more than a crisis of public health. "How do you convince somebody like that to care about their neighbor?" she asked. "That right there is the question that we are all struggling to answer."

'Electing to die quietly'

Slowly, over the last month, Minot's bars and restaurants have gotten quieter. Masks have appeared in more frequency around town. But while outward signs of the stealthy virus have only recently cropped up, the costs of the pandemic were apparent in local senior centers more than a month ago. Many nursing homes and long-term care centers in the city have struggled to contain bad outbreaks. On Nov. 5, Edgewood Vista reported 62 positive residents and 44 positive staffers. That same day, Trinity Homes, a 230-bed facility operated by Trinity Health, hit its peak, reporting 72 positive residents and 90 positive staff.

The dire situation up the road at Trinity hospital left some of these nursing home residents with little option for escape. With Trinity at or near capacity for most of the last month and other major hospitals hours away managing crises of their own, Nwaigwe said some Minot elderly have forgone treatment altogether, "electing to die quietly in the nursing homes rather than be transferred to Fargo."

Somerset Court, an assisted living facility at the edge of town, was almost completely insulated from the virus all year. Before Minot's recent surge, the facility had

registered just two asymptomatic positive tests back in July. But things changed sharply in early October when Somerset staff sent one under-the-weather resident to Trinity and learned that the woman was positive for COVID-19. LeAnna Heupel, a resident services coordinator at Somerset, said staffers immediately shepherded the woman's close contacts into isolation and waited "two excruciating days" for the next facility-wide testing event.

In a fell swoop on that day, Somerset went from zero positive tests to 58. The total number of positives climbed to 84 in the weeks following. In a facility with about 120 residents, 21 people died. And the virus came and went like lightning: By the end of last week Somerset was back to zero positive cases.

As the virus tore through Somerset, Heupel recounted that she texted her siblings to relay each new death. "I was telling them, you know, number whatever died," she said. "I started writing down in a notebook: number one, when they died, number two, and their importance, what they meant to that community."

Heupel said that to her and others at Somerset, the 21 people who died were more than numbers, and she wanted to record her memories of each. Among them were two of the facility's priests, a professor at Minot State University, a couple and old family friends.

"The saddest part about it is, on Thursday, we went in and told a few people that they had it," Heupel said. "They were not sick. They looked at us like we were crazy. And then by the next Friday they were gone."

Readers can reach Forum reporter Adam Willis, a Report for America corps member, at awillis@forumcomm.com.

MANDATE

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wear masks in school. She said more than 60% of community members and teachers said in a recent survey they are not in favor of mandating masks in school. Eide's district in northwestern North Dakota has about 470 students.

Earlier this week, the district's school board voted to not require masks in school. Eide said the vote puts the district in violation of the statewide mask order. And on Wednesday, Nov. 18, Baesler reached out to Eide, after news broke of the district's noncompliance and encouraged her to compel the school board to reconsider, Eide said.

If the school district continues to defy the order, it could lose its state aid funding and be fined, and the district, particularly school board members, could be held liable, Eide said.

"Any time a person, including a school district or school board, disregards laws they do so with the understanding that consequences can occur," Baesler said Thursday, Nov. 19, in a statement to The Forum. "We are talking with our attorney and carefully examining the potential consequences and sanctions that could result, and encourage school boards and districts to do so as well."

Baesler also said schools that do not follow the order may be met with legal action from Interim State Health Officer Dirk Wilke, as he has the power to do so if his orders are not followed.

"I think it would be prudent for a school district to anticipate that the state health officer is exploring enforcement," Baesler said.

In the Tioga School District, Eide said many teachers and students currently do not wear masks in school, though they follow other virus mitigation strategies like washing hands and using hand sanitizer.

In the wake of the new mask mandate, Alexander Public Schools stated it will encourage the order, but it "will not be policing it."

"My staff does ask the kids to abide by the law," said Leslie Bieber, Alexander Public Schools superintendent. "When they don't, then, if we feel it necessary, we call law enforcement to respond accordingly."

Alexander Public Schools is in western North Dakota in McKenzie County, and the McKenzie County sheriff has been adamant that his officers will not be enforcing the mandate and encouraging education instead.

"We are abiding by the executive order," Bieber said. "It's just not up to us to issue a citation. It's up to local law enforcement as the order reads."

The Tioga School Board is planning to meet in the next few days to reconsider complying with the law, Eide said.

Baesler said to the best of the Department of Public Instruction's knowledge, other schools around the state are adjusting to comply with the new mask mandate.

Readers can reach Forum reporter Michelle Griffith, a Report for America corps member, at mgriffith@forumcomm.com.