

# NDSU LIMITS ATTENDANCE

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# The Forum

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WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2020

# FIERY 1ST DEBATE

## Pandemic, Supreme Court seat, economy spark war of words

By Jarrett Renshaw and Steve Holland  
Reuters

CLEVELAND — Republican President Donald Trump and Democratic rival Joe Biden battled fiercely over Trump's leadership on the coronavirus pandemic, the economy and taxes in a fiery first debate on Tuesday marked by Trump's repeated interruptions.

With moderator Chris Wallace trying in vain at times to control the debate, the two White House contenders talked over each other and lobbed insults in a breathtaking political brawl that made it hard for either man to make a point.

"Will you shut up, man? This is so un-presidential," said an exasperated Biden after repeated interruptions during only the first segment of the debate on the Supreme Court.

Biden called Trump a "clown" and a "racist" and told him: "You're the worst president America has ever had."

Trump for his part said: "There's nothing smart about you, Joe."

Biden questioned Trump's leadership on the coronavirus pandemic, saying Trump had panicked and failed to protect Americans because he was more concerned about the economy.

"He panicked or he looked at the stock market," Biden said of Trump, who has pushed for states to reopen their economies and played down the threat of the pandemic.

**DEBATE:** Page A8



Olivier Douliery / Pool via REUTERS

President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden take part in the first presidential debate on Tuesday, Sept. 29, at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio.

# North Dakota hospitals face shortage of intensive care beds

## Admissions surge as pandemic rages; chronic nursing shortage remains

By Jeremy Turley, Patrick Springer and Michelle Griffith  
Forum staff writers

BISMARCK — North Dakota risks running out of staffed hospital beds in some medical centers — only 22 intensive care unit beds are available statewide — as a chronic nursing shortage collides with the spiking coronavirus pandemic.

The bed shortage is perhaps most dire in Grand Forks, where Altru has no available ICU beds and 17 inpatient beds as of Tuesday, Sept. 29, according to state Department of Health records obtained by Forum News Service.

Bismarck's two hospitals, Sanford and CHI St. Alexius, have a combined two available ICU beds and 15 inpatient beds. However, Sanford Bismarck announced Tuesday it is opening a new unit with six ICU beds and eight regular beds.

Fargo's Sanford, Essentia and VA hospitals had just 12 available ICU beds and 31 inpatient beds among them.

Most of the remaining 192 open inpatient beds in the state are tucked away in rural areas like Belcourt, Bowman and Fort Yates, where hospitals often have very limited capabilities to care for patients with serious ailments.

The total of 255 available inpatient beds and 22 ICU beds around the state as of Tuesday, according to the state's database, cuts in stark contrast with the picture of hospital capacity painted by the health department's public-facing coronavirus dashboard.

**SHORTAGE:** Page A4



Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor

A patient is transferred from a Life Link III helicopter Tuesday, Sept. 29, to Sanford Medical Center in Fargo.

# ACA faces legal challenge; 21,000 North Dakotans enrolled

By Adam Willis  
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BISMARCK — With the passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg this month and the Trump administration's nomination of her likely conservative suc-

cessor, the long odds of a legal case to overturn Obamacare have gotten considerably shorter.

The challenge to the Affordable Care Act, a lawsuit driven by the state of Texas since 2018, has been endorsed

by North Dakota and many of its Republican lawmakers. Nearly 21,000 North Dakotans are currently enrolled in the federal health care program.

State Insurance Commissioner Jon Godfread,

who oversees and regulates the implementation of the ACA in North Dakota, is a vocal proponent of repealing the program.

"It hasn't really necessarily adjusted any of the problems in North

Dakota, in my opinion," said Godfread, a Republican. "What it has done, is it's placed a lot of burden on those small business owners — the farmers, the ranchers, the folks who don't have access to that

large group market or the economies of scale. They're the ones paying that full weight of the ACA implementation."

In the two years that the Texas lawsuit has

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**Today's weather**  
**58°**  
**40°**

Becoming cloudy  
Details, D4



**\$2.00**  
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# Multistate 911 outage under investigation

By Hannah Shirley  
Forum News Service

GRAND FORKS — Officials continue to investigate the cause of a multistate 911 outage on Monday, Sept. 28, that affected calls in North Dakota and Minnesota.

The Grand Forks Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) is not believed to have been affected by the outage, but at least three other PSAPs in the state were. CenturyLink is expected to report the cause of outages in North Dakota in the coming days, as well as the number of disconnected 911 calls.

According to a release from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety Emergency Communication Network division (DPS-ECN), the cause of the outage is still under investigation. However, in

its preliminary review, CenturyLink says the problem originated on a partnering vendor's platform when an internal networking component failed to correctly forward traffic.

The outage began at about 6:20 p.m. and, according to DPS-ECN, lasted 48 minutes. It remains unclear why some PSAPs were affected while others weren't, said Jason Horning, the Next Generation 911 program manager for the North Dakota Association of Counties.

"There was a period of time last night that 911 calls were not getting through as they normally would," Horning said. "It happened for some of our PSAPs, and we have an idea of some of them, but we really do need to see the official reason for all the details

and everything that CenturyLink is currently building."

At this time, at least three North Dakota PSAPs are known to have experienced issues:

- ▶ the North Dakota State 911 Center, which provides 911 services to 25 rural counties;
- ▶ Red River Regional Dispatch Center, which provides services to Cass County and Clay County, which encompass the Fargo-Moorhead area;
- ▶ and the Lake Region 911 Center, which serves five counties in north-central North Dakota.

Horning said that he has received an initial estimate on the number of 911 calls that were disconnected during the outage, but he described the numbers as

**911:** Page A6



**BUSINESS:**  
Aldevron advances plans for new south Fargo facility,  
**PAGE C1**

## SHORTAGE

From Page A1

City	Hospital name	Available staffed ICU beds	Available staffed inpatient beds (non-ICU)
Fargo	Essentia Health	6	15
Fargo	Sanford Health Fargo	5	10
Fargo	VA Hospital	1	6
Bismarck	CHI St. Alexius Bismarck	2	12
Bismarck	Sanford Health Bismarck*	0	3
Grand Forks	Altru Health System	0	17
Minot	Trinity Health	1	10
Williston	CHI St. Alexius Williston	3	5
	CHI St. Alexius Dickinson	0	0
	Jamestown Regional Medical Center	3	5
Devils Lake	CHI St. Alexius Devils Lake	0	14
Watford City	McKenzie County H.C. Systems	0	0
RURAL	34 rural hospitals combined	1	158
ALL	All 46 ND hospitals combined	22	255

Sanford Health Bismarck announced on Tuesday, Sept. 29, it will add six ICU beds and eight inpatient beds. All figures reflect most recent data reported to the North Dakota Department of Health between 9/27-9/29.

garb to prevent coronavirus infection reduces the number of patients that nurses can care for, compounding the difficulties.

“This is spreading so rampantly that we can’t keep up,” she said of COVID-19 cases, which started to rise after the Sturgis, S.D., motorcycle rally in August.

St. Alexius Dickinson is reluctant to send patients to other hospitals, sometimes hundreds of miles from their families, Opstedahl said.

“We’d like to keep them here if we could,” she said. “I hate to send patients so far away. We want to take care of our community.”

The chronic shortage of health-care workers, especially nurses, has been exacerbated by the additional strains imposed by the pandemic, said Rich Laksonen, medical director of the emergency department at Mountrail County Medical Center in Stanley.

“I would say nursing is the No. 1 issue when it comes to staffing these beds,” he said. The pandemic is adding a layer of patients to those that hospitals ordinarily must treat, Laksonen added.

“This isn’t just COVID patients,” he said of the spike in hospital admissions around the state. “There are a lot of people who are getting really sick right now. It’s kind of half and half.”

Pressure on North Dakota’s hospitals is likely to continue with no sign that the pandemic is easing in the state — which continues to lead the nation in per-capita infections, 51.9 per 100,000. As of Tuesday, Sept. 29, a pandemic-high 105 COVID-19 patients were hospitalized around the state.

In the spring, the state designated several sites for field hospitals in the event medical centers are overwhelmed by patients. However, as of Tuesday, the state has no plans to deploy additional resources for hospital overflow, though it is ready to do so if needed.

“So while we’re on alert and monitoring capacity carefully, it’s no reason to panic, but it is a good reason for people to take active steps to prevent COVID,” Peske said in a statement.

Hospital administrators say the shortage is more one of a lack

of adequate staffing — especially for nurses — than of beds. The limitation is the number of nurses available to care for patients in those beds, which limits the number of patients a hospital can accept.

A lack of current information about staffing for beds around the state was such a pressing issue, in fact, that state health officials called an urgent meeting with hospital administrators around the state late Friday, Sept. 25.

At the meeting, health officials announced refinements to the online reporting tool enabling hospitals to report not only beds, but staffing to make those beds available, providing a more accurate picture of bed capacity.

Hospital administrators consult the database to see where they might be able to transfer patients if they run out of beds.

### Winter worries

The dire strain on North Dakota hospitals might seem like the fever pitch of capacity concerns, but experts project the approaching winter months could make matters even worse.

Projections compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predict that the state will add an average of about five to 15 new COVID-19 hospital patients per day through Oct. 22.

Influenza season, which usually starts in October and intensifies later in winter, will impose additional demands for hospital beds, along with other respiratory viruses that become more prevalent during cold weather.

During the 2019-20 flu season, 549 flu patients were hospitalized in North Dakota, with the weekly peak reaching 90 hospital cases, according to state figures.

Many smaller rural hospitals, which generally don’t admit patients with COVID-19, still have bed capacity.

McKenzie County Healthcare System in Watford City, which has 24 beds but lacks an ICU, is preparing to accept low-acuity patients from Minot, if asked, said Sam Perry, director of operations.

“We’ve been preparing for the storm,” he said. “It’s smart, especially for the health-care system, to prepare

## COVID-19 IN OUR REGION

### North Dakota totals

**New cases:** 419  
**Active cases:** 3,651 (-18 on 9/29)  
**Positivity rate:** 9.37%  
**Currently hospitalized:** 105  
**Deaths:** 239 (+5)

### Cass County totals

**New cases:** 71  
**Active cases:** 523 (-5)  
**Active per 10K:** 29  
**Deaths:** 77 (+0)

### Minnesota totals

**New cases:** 817  
**Deaths:** 2,020 (+5)

### Clay County totals

**New cases:** 7  
**Deaths:** 41 (+0)

Totals as of 9 p.m. last night. For the most timely information, see InForum.com

Forum Design Center

# ‘60 Minutes’ examines ND border wall builder

## Report suggests Cramer provided sensitive material to aid Fisher Industries

### Forum staff report

Award-winning television program “60 Minutes” took a look at the saga of Dickinson, N.D., contractor Fisher Industries and its efforts to secure billions of dollars in government contracts. The story focused on Fisher’s building of a border fence along the Rio Grande River near Mission, Texas.

Fisher Industries and CEO Tommy Fisher secured about \$2 billion in contracts to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Fisher worked with a non-profit named We Build the Wall, whose top executives like Steve Bannon and Brian Kolfage were recently indicted on federal fraud charges.

Much of the “60 Minutes” piece was a rehash of earlier reporting, much of it done by the Texas Tribune and ProPublica, but it did not paint a positive picture of Fisher Industries, its CEO Tommy Fisher or North Dakota U.S. Sen. Kevin Cramer.

Cramer is known to have unapologetically lobbied President Donald Trump to give Fisher border wall contracts. There is an inference in the “60 Minutes” story that Cramer provided sensitive information to Fisher to help the company in its bids to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“Sources also told us that Republican Senator Kevin Cramer of North Dakota had been aggressively trying to steer contracts to Fisher Sand and Gravel,” “60 Minutes” reported. “They say Senator Cramer demanded sensitive information from the Army Corps of Engineers about competing bids.”

Democrats have asked that Cramer’s involvement in the contracting process be investigated.

“When some of those documents you request gives an individual a potential unfair advantage in the procurement process, then I think that has to be reviewed. We asked the Inspector General to look at it,” said Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., in the “60 Minutes” report.

According to the report, Cramer said he was “exercising Congressional oversight,” but denied sharing information with Fisher Industries.

The Inspector General’s investigation is ongoing, the report said.

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### Coming to a head

The scarcity of beds in major medical hubs — Fargo, Bismarck, Grand Forks and Minot — is so great that rural hospitals like the Mountrail County Medical Center in Stanley are preparing to receive low-acuity patients, if called upon.

Elsewhere, hospitals including CHI St. Alexius Dickinson have had to transfer patients because they are full.

“We’re having to send all over the place,” including to hospitals in Fargo and Billings, Mont., because the 25-bed St. Alexius Health in Dickinson has been full at times, said DeeAnna Opstedahl, vice president of patient care.

“Lately we have had a need for all of our beds to be filled,” she said. Even requiring nurses to work an extra shift per pay period is not enough. “It’s a short-term solution,” Opstedahl said. “We’re hoping that after six weeks we’ll be through the surge.”

Efforts to hire traveling nurses to fill in have been unsuccessful, she added. Also, gowning properly with protective