

IN LOCAL & STATE, B1 TAPPING INTO OKTOBERFEST



IN SPORTS, A8 SCSU BEATS MAVS 3-1

IN CURRENTS, C1 HALLOWEEN FICTION

TODAY'S OBITUARIES

- Donald Megaw
• Patrick Lee Hinkel
• Kenneth Kastens

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The week in photos

Each week The Associated Press compiles a collection of its best photojournalism. View this week's images at mankatofreepress.com/multimedia.

SPORTS

Mavs lose in football

Wayne State buried Minnesota State with 28 points in the fourth quarter, it was the first home loss for MSU since 2016 and dropped the Mavericks' record to 4-2. — A8

LOTTERY

- Saturday's Daily 3 3-0-9
Friday's Gopher 5 7-17-27-30-43
Saturday's Powerball 12-17-30-45-62 and 5
Saturday's Lotto America 6-22-45-48-51 and 4
Saturday's Northstar Cash 1-16-19-29-31
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WEATHER, PAGE B10

Cloudy

High in the upper 60s. Low around 50.



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Mankato, Minnesota

SHOT CLOCK

Staff vaccinations a nursing home issue



Photos by Pat Christman

Benedictine Living Community wellness assistant Alex Adamson leads residents in exercises Friday at the St. Peter facility.

Anticipated mandate prompts staffing worries

By Brian Arola
barola@mankatofreepress.com

After achieving 90% or higher COVID-19 vaccination rates among nursing home residents, getting staff vaccinated at similar levels has proven to be more challenging for area facilities.

Gaps between resident and staff vaccination rates are common at nursing homes across the state. Both groups were among the earliest eligible for vaccines in Minnesota, as long-term care facilities were particularly hard hit by the virus in 2020.

A proposed federal vaccination mandate for workers could boost the rate, while also raising concerns about the impact it could have on already low staffing levels.

"Nobody in the senior provider field has enough staff," said Teresa Hildebrandt, CEO/campus administrator at Benedictine Living Community in St. Peter. "So now if we're mandated to not have staff working who are unvaccinated, I don't know honestly what's going to happen."

President Joe Biden announced in August the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, or CMS, would develop emergency regulations requiring nursing home staff to be vaccinated. The requirement would apply to the more than 15,000 nursing homes that accept Medicare or Medicaid, accounting for most such facilities in the U.S.

In the announcement, CMS Administrator Chiquita Brooks-LaSure stated the agency will work with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, long-term care associations and unions to advance the policy.

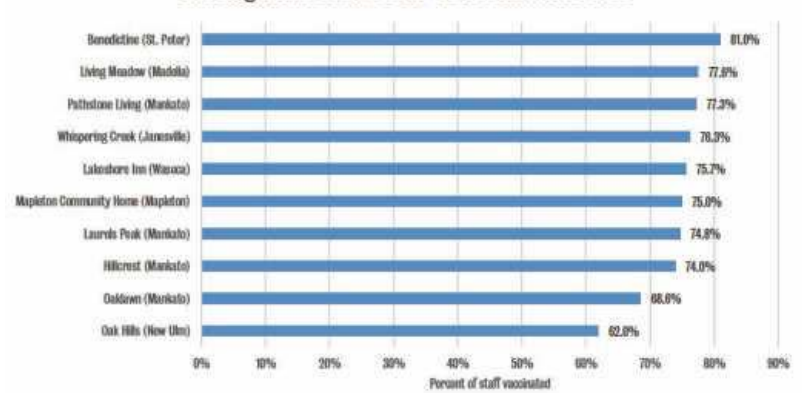
"The data are clear that higher levels of staff vaccination are linked to fewer outbreaks among residents, many of whom are at an increased risk of infection, hospitalization, or death," she stated.

So far, there hasn't been a date



Benedictine certified nursing assistant/trained medication aide Dana Weldon wheels a lift out of a patient's room.

Nursing home staff COVID-19 vaccination rates



Source: Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services

set for when the requirement would take effect. Patti Cullen, president/CEO at Care Providers of Minnesota, said she's been looking at the federal docket every day for more information, to no avail.

More details could come in mid to late October. As an organization representing hundreds of nursing homes and other care providers in Minnesota, Cullen said the timing on any requirement is one of the main answers they need.

Raising the rates

In the interim, CMS data showed 67.1% of nursing home staff nationwide received the COVID-19 vaccine as of Sept. 26.

Nearly all nursing homes in south-central Minnesota, including the four in Mankato, have staff vaccination rates above the national average. Mankato's nursing homes range between 68.6% to 77.3% for

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Mobile clinic visits planned

Four days in Butterfield

By Brian Arola
barola@mankatofreepress.com

BUTTERFIELD — Butterfield residents usually have to make the drive over to St. James, Mountain Lake or further for medical appointments.

This week, a clinic is coming to them.

Mayo Clinic Health System's mobile health clinic will come to the city of about 500 people on Tuesday and Thursday, then again on Oct. 26 and 28.

The clinic, which has exam rooms, a lab and pharmacy services within what looks like a blue charter bus, travels to rural areas in the health system's southwest and southeast regions. Since launching in July, it visited Sherburn in Martin County, along with sports physical clinics in St.

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Analysis

McConnell at helm of debt crisis

By Lisa Mascaro
AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON — In the frantic bid to avert a default on the nation's debt, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell held a position of unusual power — as the one who orchestrated both the problem and the solution.

McConnell is no longer the majority leader, but he is exerting his minority status in convoluted and uncharted ways, all in an effort to stop President Joe Biden's domestic agenda and even if doing so pushes the country toward grave economic uncertainty.

All said, the outcome of this debt crisis leaves zero confidence there won't be a next one. In fact, McConnell engineered an end to

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ROOMS AND REST FURNITURE MATTRESS

# VACCINE: Pathstone has highest vax rate of Mankato nursing homes

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staff vaccinations.

Ecumen Pathstone Living in Mankato has the 77.3% rate. In a statement, Executive Director Rachael Evers said the protocol until CMS releases more information calls for team members to be vaccinated or complete a declination process, which includes education and weekly COVID-19 testing.

“We know that right now, the vaccine is our best defense against the virus and its variants, and we’re grateful to all — especially our team members, residents and their family members — who’ve chosen to get vaccinated,” she stated. “We hope that even more will do so in the coming weeks.”

Monarch Healthcare Management operates the Hillcrest, Laurels Peak and Oaklawn nursing homes in Mankato. Laurels Peak has a 74.8% staff vaccination rate, Hillcrest is at 74% and Oaklawn is at 68.6%.

As Monarch waits for more word on a mandate, Chief Operating Officer Marc Halpert said they continue to encourage vaccinations for the workers who haven’t gotten them yet.

“I’m hopeful that my staff will get the vaccine,” he said. “It’s been proven that it’s safe and helpful.”

He noted hospitals regularly report being filled with mostly unvaccinated patients. And vaccinated people who get breakthrough cases experience milder symptoms.

He estimated about 20% more staff would likely get the vaccine if it were mandated. Mandates in health settings elsewhere in the country resulted in the vast majority of workers getting the vaccine, with small percentages following through on threats to quit.

The issue with nursing homes is even a small percentage leaving would worsen existing shortages.

Statewide survey results released Thursday found more than 23,000 direct care positions are vacant at long-term care providers across Minnesota. The survey of 300 in-state pro-

viders by Long-Term Care Imperative, a collaboration working on changes in older adult services, identified nursing homes in every region with 10% or higher rates of unfilled positions.

The leaders at Monarch, Ecumen and Benedictine said their nursing homes aren’t exceptions on the staffing front. Facilities are employing similar strategies in the hopes of getting more workers vaccinated.

Ongoing conversations with unvaccinated workers are important parts of the strategy, Evers stated.

“Listening without judgment is key, and then addressing their questions with research-based facts, and offering additional trusted resources as well,” she stated.

Benedictine’s St. Peter nursing home has 81% of its staff vaccinated against COVID-19, the highest rate in the region. Hildebrandt said the goal is to “see everybody vaccinated that’s able to be vaccinated.”

The nursing home’s infection control nurse and director of nursing have done a good job getting unvaccinated staff the verified information they need, Hildebrandt said.

One-on-ones help them understand why staff members are opposed to the vaccine, she added. Then they’re in a better position to answer staff concerns.

“There’s a lot of misconceptions about the vaccine, and we try our best to provide information from legitimate sources,” Hildebrandt said.

Monarch uses one-on-ones to hear and respond to staff concerns about vaccinations as well. Getting to 100% is the goal in anticipation of the mandate, Halpert said, adding there are definitely worries about what a mandate would do to existing staffing issues.

Working as a care provider isn’t easy, he said, pointing out temp agencies also don’t have as many workers these days. Recent and upcoming wage increases are among the strategies Monarch used to



Photos by Pat Christman

Benedictine Living Community certified nursing assistant Cassie Ziegler takes a resident to her room.



Benedictine Living Community registered nurse Joel Manipud talks with certified nursing assistant/trained medication aide Dana Weldon.

keep workers.

“It’s a difficult job and a lot of responsibility,” he said. “We’ve tried a lot of things.”

Although a vaccine mandate could worsen existing staffing shortages, the proposal didn’t cause

them. Staffing struggles in nursing, an issue for a while now, weren’t helped by the pandemic, Hildebrandt said,

“COVID-19 has made it worse,” she said. “Our facility had an outbreak last year, and people just quit.”

Less was known about COVID-19 at the time. Outbreaks in such high-risk settings led some to consider other careers.

Another result of the pandemic was older staff seeing it as a good time to retire, understandably so,

Hildebrandt said.

Funding for emergency staffing could be one short-term solution for nursing homes. Evers stated Ecumen Pathstone is hopeful that the state will offer the funding, as well as “appropriate money to enhance caregiver wages to bolster retention and recruitment efforts in long-term care.”

Long-Term Care Imperative’s Thursday survey announcement named both proposals as possible solutions. The workforce problems need more than a one-time infusion of funding, said Gayle Kvenvold, CEO of LeadingAge Minnesota, in a release.

“Without more significant investments in the senior care workforce and changes to the reimbursement system to allow this to happen, this crisis will threaten the availability of care for the most vulnerable at a time when we are facing the largest population of seniors in American history,” she stated.

Follow Brian Arola @ BrianArola

# ANALYSIS: McConnell’s sole goal in crisis was to obstruct Biden’s agenda

Continued from Page A1

the standoff that ensures Congress will be in the same spot in December when funding to pay America’s bills next runs out. That means another potentially devastating debt showdown, all as the COVID-19 crisis lingers and the economy struggles to recover.

“Mitch McConnell loves chaos,” said Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, chairman of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee. “He’s a very smart tactician and strategist, but the country pays the price so often for what he does.”

The crisis has cemented McConnell’s legacy as a master of misdirection. He’s the architect of the impasse and the one who resolved it, if only for the short term. More battles are to come as Democrats narrow Biden’s big agenda, a now-\$2 trillion expansion of health,

child care and climate change programs, all paid for with taxes on corporations and the wealthy that Republicans oppose.

To some Republicans, McConnell is a shrewd leader, using every tool at his disposal to leverage power and undermine Biden’s priorities. To others, including Donald Trump, he is weak, having “caved” too soon. To Democrats, McConnell remains an infuriating rival who has shown again he is willing to break one institutional norm after another to pursue Republican power.

“McConnell’s role is to be the leader of the opposition and it’s his job to push back on what the majority wants to do,” said Alex Conant, a Republican strategist.

“Nobody should be surprised to see the leader of the Republicans making the Democrats’ job harder,” he said.

Biden, in comments made via video Saturday to the Democratic National Com-

mittee’s fall meeting, hinted at the damage McConnell could inflict not just on that agenda but also on the party’s broader case to the electorate. The president urged activists at virtual meeting to keep making the case for government solutions, even as Republicans try to undercut that message.

“Just as the Republican Party today offers nothing but fear, lies and broken promises, we have to keep cutting through the Republican fog that government is the problem, and show that we the people are always the solution,” Biden said.

The debt showdown left Democrats, who control Washington, portrayed as big spenders, willing to boost the nation’s now-\$28.4 trillion debt to pay the bills. But both parties have contributed to that load because of past decisions that leave the government rarely operating in the black.

Republicans risk recriminations from all sides of their deeply divided party. In easing off the crisis, McConnell insulated his Republicans from further blame, but infuriated Trump and his allies, who are eager to skewer the Kentucky senator for giving in.

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, said he told his colleagues during a private meeting before the debt vote that it was “a mistake for Republican leadership to agree to this deal.”

Once a routine vote to ensure the nation’s bills are paid, raising the debt limit has become a political weapon, particularly for Republicans, to rail against government spending. The tea party class of Republicans a decade ago brought the nation to the brink of default over the issue and set a new GOP strategy.

In this case, McConnell made it clear he had no demands other than to disrupt

Biden’s domestic agenda, the now-\$2 trillion package that is the president’s signature legislation but is derided by Republicans as a “socialist tax-and-spending spree.”

In muscling Biden’s agenda to passage, Democrats are relying on a complicated procedure, the budget reconciliation process, which allows 51 votes for approval, rather than the 60 typically needed to overcome Senate objections. In the 50-50 split Senate, Vice President Kamala Harris gives Democrats the majority with her ability to cast a tiebreaking vote.

McConnell seized on the Democratic budget strategy as a way to conflate the issues, announcing months ago he wanted Democrats to increase the debt limit on their own using the same procedure. It was his way of linking Biden’s big federal government overhaul with the nation’s rising debt load, even though they

are separate and most of Biden’s agenda hasn’t been enacted.

The debt raising vote has rarely been popular, and both parties have had to do it on their own, at times. But McConnell struck new legislative ground trying to dictate the terms to Democrats.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., promptly ignored McConnell’s demands for the cumbersome process, and set out to pass the debt ceiling bill with a more traditional route.

As the Oct. 18 deadline approached, when Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned the government would run out of funds to pay the nation’s bills, Schumer’s strategy hit the Republican blockade, or filibuster. Only after business pressure mounted and Biden implored Republicans to “get out of the way” did McConnell call a time out.

# CLINIC: A way to bring more medical services to a small town in rural Watonwan County

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James, Butterfield, Truman and Granada.

Bringing more clinic services to Watonwan County in Butterfield this month was a response to interest from the community, said Amy Long, administrator at Mayo Clinic Health System in St. James and Fairmont.

“We do see a fair number of patients from the Butterfield area

that come to our Fairmont and St. James clinic locations,” she said. “That’s the primary reason we wanted to offer select dates.”

The health system’s St. James clinic and hospital is about a 12-minute drive east from Butterfield, while a Sanford Health clinic in Mountain Lake is a similar drive away to the west. Mayo in Fairmont’s hospital and clinic is about 40 miles away.

Less access to health care is

one of the factors contributing to worse health outcomes for people living in rural areas. New census data found about 14% of Americans live in rural areas.

The mobile health clinic’s services are similar to what a patient would get at a primary care clinic, Long said. Patients could receive health screenings, COVID-19 and flu vaccinations, chronic disease checks, medication refills and other acute illness or chronic

disease treatments in the mobile unit.

For specialty care, telemedicine capabilities are built-in. It’s an extension of the health system’s virtual care options, said Dr. Gokhan Anil, chair of clinical practice for Mayo Clinic Health System’s southwest Minnesota region, in a release.

“The mobile health clinic is part of Mayo Clinic’s commitment to innovation and creative solutions

that serve local communities,” he stated.

More clinic dates in Butterfield could happen in the future if the demand is there, Long said.

“Our goal is to continue to take it to communities and see what needs we can meet,” she said.

The mobile clinic’s hours will be from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. each day in Butterfield. Long encouraged people in need of appointments to call 507-238-8500.