

Health and **Welfare**

Otter Tail County, MN– The Otter Tail County Board of Commissioners proudly declared the first week of April 2024 National Public Health Week in Otter Tail County. This annual observance, held during the first full week of April, honors the crucial role of public health in our communities and spotlights key topics for well-being. This year's theme is "Protecting, Connecting, and Thriving: We Are All Public Health." Across Minnesota, communities are seeing a shift towards proactive health practices, including tobacco cessation, adoption of healthier diets, increased physical activity, and increased focus on mental health and well-being, underlining the importance of public health initiatives. The Otter Tail County Board of Commissioners proudly supports National Public Health Week 2024, acknowledging and celebrating the ongoing dedicated service of public health professionals in promoting healthy communities where individuals can thrive.

>>January Ideal Time to Test for Radon

(St. Paul, MN) --The Minnesota Department of Health is pushing to get people to test their homes for radon. (RAY'-dahn) Dan Trantner of the M-D-H Indoor Air program says it is a type of radiation that comes from our soil and can seep into our homes. He says January is an ideal time to test because our homes are closed up and furnaces are running. You can get a radon test kit for low or no cost through a city or county health department in Minnesota, or at a hardware store.

>>New 'Red Flag' Law Takes Effect in Minnesota

(St. Paul, MN) -- Minnesota's still-controversial "red flag" law takes effect today (Mon 1/1/24). It allows household members, law enforcement, prosecutors, or a guardian to ask the court for an "extreme risk protection order", banning someone from possessing firearms for up to a year if they're judged a danger to themselves or others. New Hope Democrat Cedrick Frazier, during House floor debate said it does not confiscate guns without due process. He says, "the reality of this is, we're trying to save lives here. We're trying to prevent more mass shootings in our communities." Pennington Republican Matt Bliss warned law enforcement will confiscate the firearms, however, "They're gonna leave that person in the house with this person that they're saying is a danger to themselves or others, with hammers, knives, fists." Republicans unsuccessfully argued a 72-hour mental health hold is a better way.

>8 More Flu-Related Deaths in Minnesota in Late December

(St. Paul, MN) -- Eight flu-related deaths were reported in Minnesota the final week of December for a total of 22 this season. State health officials say 225 people in the state were hospitalized with influenza the week ending December 30th. There were no outbreaks in schools because most districts were on holiday break. Two long-term care facilities reported flu outbreaks last week. Influenza A is the most common strain in Minnesota.

>>Final MNsure Application Deadline is January 15th

(St. Paul, MN) -- The final deadline to apply for health and dental insurance through the state's marketplace is creeping up. MNsure CEO Libby Caulum (CAH-lum) says Minnesotans wanting to obtain coverage effective February 1st need to sign up by January 15th. She says most MNsure enrollees, including many middle-income families who weren't eligible before, qualify for discounts, in the form of tax credits that lower the cost of monthly premiums. She says in 2024 the average savings is 6,750 dollars or about 560 dollars a month, and access to these savings is only available through MNsure.

>>Complaint alleges Phillips presidential campaign illegally coordinated with super PAC

****MEDIA REFERENCE****

(Washington, DC) -- A progressive watchdog group has filed a federal campaign finance complaint against Minnesota Congressman Dean Phillips, accusing his presidential campaign of illegally coordinating with a super PAC launched by Phillips' former campaign adviser. The Star Tribune reports The Campaign for Accountability alleges Phillips and ex-adviser Steve Schmidt "engaged in multiple substantial discussions" in the two weeks leading up to the launch of Pass the Torch USA Inc -- "the very message that Schmidt apparently helped create for the Phillips campaign." In a statement the Phillips campaign calls the complaint "baseless" and adds, "All it takes is one look at our paid TV ads to see how different the strategies of these two entities are." Phillips is challenging President Joe Biden for the Democratic Party nomination.

>>New policy eliminates coverage gaps for Medical Assistance recipients under age 19

(St. Paul, MN) -- A new policy for Minnesotans under age 19 eligible for Medical Assistance ensures continuous coverage for 12 months at a time. John Connolly with the State Department of Human Services says it prevents coverage gaps when there are temporary changes in household income due to extra hours, overtime, or temporary/seasonal work. Connolly says research shows kids enrolled in continuous coverage are more likely to have fewer unmet healthcare needs and better health outcomes.

(St. Louis Park, MN) -- Classes and all activities are canceled today (Fri) at St. Louis Park High School in response to two fights on campus Thursday. School officials say a fight between groups of students happened at the end of the day, and later two adults were involved in another fight. Staff and police broke up the second fight and two people were arrested. Some minor injuries were reported. All other schools in the St. Louis Park district remain open.

>>Cigarette Smoking Blamed for Thousands of Minnesotan Deaths in 2021

(Undated) – New numbers show that cigarette smoking is blamed for the deaths of thousands of Minnesotans in 2021. Janelle Waldock of Minnesotans for a Smoke-Free Generation says commercial tobacco products are killing too many, as "6,530 people died from a smoking attributed disease. The last time we did this report that number was slightly less. We've seen it rise by three-and-a-half percent." Waldock says they're urging the legislature to end the sales of menthol and flavored tobacco products in the state.

>>National Blood Donor Month, U of M Dr. Touches on Critical Need

(Minneapolis, MN) – January is National Blood Donor Month, a time to bring awareness to the critical need for blood donations. University of Minnesota Medical School Dr. Claudia Cohn (cone) says we struggle nationwide to maintain sufficient blood supplies, but this time of year is when the supply drops significantly. "The blood industry depends upon industries and schools to host blood drives. During the holiday season, when schools aren't open and a lot of businesses have extended holidays, those blood drives don't happen." Cohn says extreme weather across the country and low post-pandemic donation levels contributed to this year's lower-than-usual inventory.

President Biden Visiting Duluth-Superior Thursday

(Duluth, MN) -- President Joe Biden flies into Duluth International Airport and speaks at noon today (Thurs) at a brewery (Earth Rider) in neighboring Superior, Wisconsin about his "Investing in America" agenda. But the Minnesota focus might end up being on the Blatnik (BLOT-nick) Bridge, with the president and Governor Tim Walz likely touting a just-approved one billion dollars in federal money to replace the aging structure. It's become a campaign issue in the 8th District U-S House race, Democratic challenger Jen Schultz blasting incumbent Republican Pete Stauber for voting against the federal infrastructure package. Stauber responds he fought to bring federal dollars back to Minnesota instead of for "economy-crushing Green New Deal initiatives in California."

>>State Capitol Hearing on Proposed End-of-Life Options Bill

(St. Paul, MN) -- There's a pre-legislative-session hearing this afternoon (Thurs 1pm) at the State Capitol on a controversial bill that backers say would allow end-of-life options for terminally-ill adults -- what opponents call assisted suicide. Democratic Senator Kelly Morrison from Deephaven says, "It's only for people who have a terminal illness and have been given a prognosis of six months or less to live, and are suffering and have decided themselves that they want to have that control." But Paul Stark with Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life says assisted suicide lacks adequate protections against coercion and abuse, and no psychiatric evaluation is required.

>>State Health Department Reports 40% Spike in Newborn Syphilis Cases

(St. Paul, MN) -- The Minnesota Department of Health is reporting there were 29 cases of newborn syphilis in 2023 including three stillbirths - the highest number in 40 years. Doctor Ruth Lynfield says untreated syphilis in pregnant people can result in stillbirths, miscarriages, premature births, smaller babies, and brain and nerve problems. Lynfield says the increase in congenital syphilis is especially troubling because it can be prevented through early detection and treatment. As recently as 2013 and 2014, there were no cases of congenital syphilis in Minnesota.

>>Rochester Man Indicted on First-Degree Murder in 2022 Shooting

(Rochester, MN) -- A Rochester man accused of fatally shooting 41-year-old Kim Robinson of Eyota (ee-OH'-tuh) on December 24th, 2022 now faces a first-degree murder charge. Olmsted County prosecutors initially charged Mustafa Bush with second-degree murder, but a grand jury found probable cause that Bush was responsible for Robinson's death while committing domestic abuse. Bush does not yet have a date set for his arraignment.

Overall, it's been a mild flu season. State Department of Health Commissioner Brooke Cunningham says we are however starting cases tick up:

=-----

[trflu1.mp3] :19 "TO TAKE OFF"

(Most of the cases in Minnesota and nationally tend to be influenza A and multiple strains out there circulating. We hope that while it is moderate right now we are on the watch for any strain to take off.)

=-----

Cunningham says it's not too late in the season to get a flu shot

Public hearings are planned the next two weeks on the closures of labor and delivery services units at hospitals in northwest and south-central Minnesota. Chris Rubesch (ROO'-bish) of the Minnesota Nurses Association is testifying at Tuesday's meeting at Essentia Health-Fosston:

=-----

[bpmnlaborunitclose2.mp3] :14 "their profit"

("I'm going to tell that I'm here speaking up for the patients in this community and all the communities and I'm gonna challenge them to work with me to improve Minnesota's health system rather than working within a broken system to maximize their profit.")

=-----

Rubesch says pregnant mothers in the Fosston area have to drive more than an hour to have their baby in Detroit Lakes. There's a public hearing next Tuesday (2/6) on the closure of the labor and delivery unit at Mayo Clinic Health System New Prague

D-F-L leaders in the Minnesota House say they'll move forward this year to make health insurance through state-subsidized MinnesotaCare available to all Minnesotans, regardless of income. Majority Leader Jamie Long says many people across Minnesota...

=-----

[bwmncarebuyin54.mp3] :17 "DAY-TO-DAY BASIS"

... "still don't have health insurance, or if they do have health insurance, they can't use it because it is too expensive. They have deductibles that are too high. They really are only covered for catastrophies, and that means that they aren't getting the care they need on a day-to-day basis."

=-----

Opponents warn it's the first step toward single-payer, state-run health insurance. Long says he personally supports that, but the purpose of this bill is to get health insurance coverage to those who don't have it or are paying unaffordable premiums. Long adds single-payer health care would be better handled at the federal level

Second Harvest Heartland, food shelf partners, and Minnesota leaders announced their Make Hunger History initiative, a multi-year plan aiming to cut hunger in half for all Minnesotans by 2030.

Governor Tim Walz praised the food shelf and the work they do, saying:

=-----

[awSSHwalz3.mp3] :16 (COMES FROM THAT)

"If we want our children to learn, they need to have full bellies. If we want to have the best-trained workforce, we need to make sure that kids are at school, ready to learn. We need to make sure that families are secure in their food, secure in their housing, and then we can talk about what else comes from that."

=-----

Minnesotans visited food shelves 7.5 million times last year. Anyone interested in getting involved can learn more at 2harvest.org

>MN Commerce Department Releases Report on Health Insurance Options

(St. Paul, MN) -- A just-released report by the state Commerce Department lays out possible options for Democrats, who are looking to make state-backed health insurance available to more Minnesotans. One option is a new health plan available through MNsure along with other open-market products, at a state budget cost of 86 million to 187 million dollars a year. Another option: allow any Minnesotans to purchase health insurance on MinnesotaCare regardless of income, at an estimated cost to the state of 113 to 364 million dollars per year. The report estimates between 107 and 151-thousand Minnesotans would enroll.

>>More Essentia Health Nurses in Duluth File for MNA Union

(Duluth, MN) -- Nurses at the Essentia Health Duluth Clinic 2nd Street want to join the Minnesota Nurses Union and filed for an election vote. The move follows recent organizing votes by nurses at Essentia Health Duluth Clinic 1st Street and Essentia East Market Advance Practice Providers. In a statement Essentia Health officials said, "We respect our colleagues' rights to consider unionization; however, we don't feel this is in their best interests or the best interests of our patients. " The union election date hasn't been scheduled.

On Friday February 2nd, Lake Region Healthcare announced that it will be closing its Bridgeway Inpatient Behavioral Health Unit in Fergus Falls. The company cites reduction in demand for services, dwindling admissions, and the inability to recruit permanent physician coverage as the factors for the decision. While there is a high demand for mental health services overall, the voluntary, very specialized type of inpatient mental health service at Bridgeway is not a match for patient demands of today, with an average of 3 of the 14 beds in the unit occupied.

“It’s incumbent upon on us to use our resources to make the most meaningful impact on the mental health needs of our communities. We know we can better use our resources to serve the mental health needs of many, many more people than we have been able to under this model,” CEO of Lake Region Kent Mattson emphasized. “Our goal and our commitment is to meet mental health care needs where the greatest impact can be made, which appears to be within outpatient services.”

Attorney General Keith Ellison says drug manufacturer Eli Lilly has agreed in a lawsuit settlement to cap out-of-pocket costs for insulin at 35 dollars per monthly prescription, plus provide free insulin to 15 clinics serving the most needy Minnesotans. Major insulin manufacturers already said they'll lower the cost to 35 dollars a month for many patients -- so why was the lawsuit necessary? Ellison says:

=-----

[bwinsulin600.mp3] :13 "NOT IN MN"

"Them saying they're gonna do something, and then being bound by a legally-enforceable lawsuit, is a big difference. So a company saying, oh, we'll do this -- they can change their mind, but now they can't -- not in Minnesota."

=-----

Litigation against two other insulin manufacturers (Sanofi-Aventis and Novo Nordisk) continues in federal court. Ellison says negotiations are under way but "I'm prepared to try this case if we have to, and they need to know that."

The American Cancer Society and anti-smoking groups are urging the Minnesota Legislature to end the sales of flavored tobacco products this session. Spokeswoman Emily Myatt says kids get hooked because the flavors mask the harsh taste of tobacco:

=-----

[bpmnflavoredcigs1.mp3] :15 "not bad"

("And makes it harder to quit. And we know that flavored tobacco products... that's the bread and butter of the tobacco industry to lure people into addiction. They are oftentimes perceived as less harmful because they're flavored. You know cotton candy that's not bad.")

=-----

Myatt says a statewide survey shows 62 percent of Minnesotans support ending the sale of flavored tobacco products. The 2024 legislative session begins Monday.

>>Dems begin push at MN Legislature for ERA/abortion rights constitutional amendment

(St. Paul, MN) -- Democrats at the Minnesota Legislature appear ready to move ahead to put a combined Equal Rights (ERA) and abortion rights constitutional amendment before voters. House Speaker Melissa Hortman says the legislature will vote this year to put the question on the ballot most likely in 2026. Hortman notes that because Democrats have narrow majorities in the House and Senate, "no outcome on any issue is guaranteed, but I believe that we will be putting a question on the ballot for 2026." And is that because Democrats are worried that having an ERA/abortion constitutional amendment on the ballot this fall could pull more Trump supporters to the polls? Hortman says, "No, I think that the Biden-Trump election will be driven by the Biden-Trump issues." Even if Democrats lose their majority in the House this fall, there would be no way for Republicans to take the ERA/abortion amendment off the 2026 ballot, because Democrats would still control the Senate -- which doesn't stand for election until 2026.

>>MN Workers, Union Leaders to Speak Out During MN's 2024 Session Priorities Event

(St. Paul, MN) -- As Minnesota's legislative session kicks off today (MON), frontline workers, union leaders, and community supporters are wasting no time in voicing their priorities. The group will gather outside St. Paul's River Centre tonight (MON, 5:15 p.m.) while the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce hosts its "2024 Session Priorities" event. They're highlighting strides during last year's session to uplift worker and family rights.

>>State Health Department Urges Measles Vaccines After 1st Case in 2 Years

(St. Paul, MN) -- The Minnesota Department of Health urges children's vaccinations after a measles case was diagnosed in Dakota County. M-D-H says the 16-month-old child was unvaccinated and recently returned from international travel. It's the first measles case in Minnesota since 2022. State health officials say the measles vaccination rate for two-year-olds has dropped since the COVID-19 pandemic and was below 80 percent last year.

>>Mille Lacs County Improving Mental Health Services

(Mille Lacs County, MN) -- Funding from the state's opioid settlement is being used for a new mental health co-responder position in Mille Lacs County. Co-responder Jessie Noehring (NEER'-ing) says the goal is to improve community mental health services. She says by responding in time to crises. We can do various things like de-escalation, provide resources, and safety assessments. We're figuring out what the community needs at this point. Noehring (NEER'-ing) has a dog named Rufus that will accompany her on some calls. She has worked in the Mille Lacs County drug treatment court and as a death investigator with the medical examiner.

>>Activists Call for More Gun Safety Measures in Minnesota

(St. Paul, MN) -- After last year's success with universal background checks and a "red flag" law, activists are pushing for additional gun safety measures as state legislators begin the 2024 session. Suzie Kaufman with Moms Demand Action says her group wants laws passed this year requiring people to secure their weapons safely in their homes and also to report lost and stolen guns, "because the majority of weapons that are used in crimes are lost or stolen guns." Governor Tim Walz says he'll see what lawmakers bring forward, "but one thing I can tell you with absolute certainty is, we do not need these weapons of war in our classrooms, on our streets." Second amendment rights groups weren't immediately available to comment.

>>State Health Officials Identify Source of Grand Rapids the Legionnaires' Disease

(Grand Rapids, MN) -- The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) is identifying areas of the municipal water system as the source of the Legionnaires' disease outbreak in Grand Rapids. Since April 2023, there have been 14 confirmed cases of Legionnaires' Disease in the area. M-D-H investigations linked the bacteria to the municipal water supply from two community buildings, which were highly related to the bacteria found in patient respiratory samples. Grand Rapids Public Utilities Manager Julie Kennedy stated their immediate focus is on developing a provisional plan to flush and disinfect the water system and installing a water chlorination system. Minnesota recorded 134 cases of Legionnaires' disease last year, resulting in six deaths.

>>Finalists for U-of-M president making campus visits

(Rochester, MN) -- One of three finalists for University of Minnesota president, Dr. James Holloway, is wrapping up three days of campus visits today (Wed). When asked this morning in Rochester about attracting and retaining students, Holloway said "we need to look for the ways that we simplify what we tell people. The person has to make a decision about whether to spend that or not and, as part of that, we have to make really clear how we bring value to society." Holloway is currently provost and executive vice president for academic affairs at the University of New Mexico. Another finalist, Doctor Laura Bloomberg from Cleveland State University is visiting the U-of-M's five campuses today, tomorrow and Friday. And Doctor Rebecca Cunningham from the University of Michigan will be in Minnesota next week.

>>Supporters of insurance coverage for infertility lobbying at MN Capitol

(St. Paul, MN) -- Legislators and supporters at the State Capitol today (WED) are pushing for Minnesota to become the 22nd state to require insurance coverage for the treatment of infertility. President and CEO of The National Infertility Association Barb Collura says because of lack of insurance, patients often resort to riskier and less effective medical treatments. Collura says, "They can afford to pay for out-of-pocket, however that can result in multiple births, twins and triplets, and that raises other risks -- premature births and so on." The group says the law will reduce financial strain on families while only minimally impacting insurance premiums. Experts say more than 185,000 Minnesotans face infertility.

>>Sen. Kunesch Speaks at MMIR Day of Remembrance, Specialty License Plates Now Available

(Undated) – Minnesotans were wearing red Wednesday, some for Valentine's Day, others for this year's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives (MMIR) Day of Remembrance. Senator Mary Kunesch joined activists and organizers to remind people that Indigenous people across the state face daily struggles. Kunesch says "There are so many broken hearts for so many reasons. Boarding schools, Missing and Murdered, lack of housing, lack of education, lack of healthcare." M-M-I-R specialty license plates, featuring a red handprint and ribbon skirt symbolizing "the historic silencing of violence that Indigenous people have faced for generations," are now available on the Minnesota Department of Public Safety's website (drive.mn.gov) for \$15.50, with all fees funding tips and rewards for MMIR cases.

>>MDH Reminds Minnesotans to Vaccinate Kids for Measles

(Undated) – The state Health Department is using two recent cases of measles to remind Minnesota parents to vaccinate their kids. Epidemiologist Emily Banerjee (BAN'-ur-jee) says the number of kindergartners fully vaccinated fell from 92 percent in 2019 to 87 percent this school year: "And so even a five-percent drop in immunizations means that there are thousands more young people who could be vulnerable to disease because they're not vaccinated. So this is something to keep in mind." Banerjee says the M-M-R vaccine is the best tool we have to protect our kids. A child from Dakota County who traveled internationally tested positive for measles last week and their unvaccinated sibling became infected this week.

A special task force says emergency medical services such as ambulances and paramedics are stretched too thin, particularly in parts of rural Minnesota. State Representative John Huot (HEW-ott) from Rosemount says the need is most acute in northern Saint Louis County, from the Iron Range to the Canadian border, due to lack of volunteers:

=-----

[bwems3.mp3] :12 "UP THERE"

"Some of the ambulances can't get out of the garage because they just don't have the staff. If they get out, they're very delayed and services from other areas have to come, and sometime we have a 90-minute recorded response time up there."

=-----

Huot says Otter Tail County also needs help. He's proposing 25 million dollars in state funding for "sprint medic" programs that would put trained life-saving personnel on-scene more quickly than ambulances -- which could then be canceled if the patient doesn't need transport to the hospital.

ST. PAUL, MN — LeadingAge Minnesota, a respected advocacy group for Minnesota's aging population, recently named Senator Jordan Rasmusson (R-Fergus Falls) as its Public Official of the Year. This award honors public servants who went above and beyond the normal call for action and made a significant difference in the field of older adult services.

Sen. Rasmusson was presented with this award at LeadingAge Minnesota's Opinion Leaders event at the LeadingAge Minnesota Institute & Expo, held in Saint Paul from Feb. 6-9. In attendance were leaders from senior care organizations throughout the state, including local leaders from PioneerCare and LBHomes in Fergus Falls, Perham Health and Knute Nelson Walker Methodist.

Sen. Rasmusson received this award for his work last session in securing a deal for nursing homes to receive \$300 million. This package includes direct grants, facility rate increases, and a workforce incentive fund that adds up to about an average of \$1.1 million for every nursing home in the state. With Minnesota nursing homes facing a dire staffing crisis, this additional funding serves as a critical lifeline that will keep Minnesota nursing homes open. If it were not for this funding package, Minnesota could have lost up to 40 nursing homes this year.

>>Senate Bill to Provide Medical Assistance for Incarcerated Individuals

(St. Paul, MN) -- Senator Alice (uh-LEASE') Mann of Edina is sponsoring a bill that would provide people in prison with access to Medical Assistance (MA). She says the proposed legislation would enable incarcerated individuals to receive quality healthcare before their needs become an emergency. It covers various aspects of care including substance use, recovery, and mental health. Mann calls it one of her top priorities for the legislative session.

>>Freedom Soda Initiative to Benefit Federal Marijuana Prisoners

(Rochester, MN) -- Proceeds from sales of a Minnesota-made T-H-C beverage are going to benefit people imprisoned on federal marijuana convictions. Travis Cullen became an activist after serving an eight-year federal prison sentence and is now C-E-O of the Freedom Soda Initiative and owner of Laughing Waters cannabis store in Rochester. Freedom Soda is now in stores and they are giving 30 percent of profits to inmates in federal prison. Cullen says there is no federal expungement for marijuana convictions and they're seeking clemency for inmates from the Biden administration. Freedom Soda comes in eight flavors, and each can contain ten milligrams of T-H-C.

BARNESVILLE, Minn. (KDLM) — Rural emergency medical service providers across the nation, and in our area, are facing significant challenges and the possibility of having to shut down. On Tuesday, February 20th, stakeholders from Barnesville, Perham, and Henning were brought together by Senator Tina Smith's office to discuss potential solutions. A major problem for rural EMS departments is reimbursement for calls involving Medicare patients. Unless the patients are transported to a hospital, the departments likely aren't going to be paid for it. Senator Smith recently signed onto the EMS Reimbursement for On-Scene Care and Support Act, which looks to address this by providing Medicare reimbursement for calls where transportation isn't needed.

Lake Region Healthcare (LRH) announced Monday that it has been recognized as a 2024 Top 100 Rural & Community Hospital by The Chartis Center for Rural Health. Chartis' annual Top 100 award program recognizes outstanding performance among the nation's rural hospitals based on the results of the Chartis Rural Hospital Performance INDEX®. This marks the seventh time since 2016 LRH has achieved the distinction.

>> Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month

(Minneapolis, MN) -- Medical professionals are witnessing a steep rise in colorectal cancer cases among younger adults. Gastrointestinal Oncologist Dr. Emil Lou notes that while colorectal cancer traditionally affects individuals in their 60s and 70s, there has been a noticeable increase among young adults over the past five to six years. The American Cancer Society has advocated for lowering the age for colonoscopy screening from 50 to 45, a move Dr. Lou believes may further decrease in the coming years.

>>MPD Activates New Robbery Response Protocol After Multiple Incidents

(Minneapolis, MN) -- The Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) has implemented its new robbery response protocol following several violent incidents on Monday within a two-hour timeframe. Upon activation, the "all hands on deck" protocol reallocates non-emergency officers to address specific robbery incidents if a crime pattern emerges. MPD received multiple calls reporting six incidents, all featuring descriptions of similar suspects. As of now, no arrests have been made.

>>Cats Rescued from Foreclosed Home

(Coon Rapids, MN) -- Animal rescue workers are helping treat nearly 80 cats found abandoned in a foreclosed house in Coon Rapids. A house cleaner discovered the cats when he entered the home. The cats reportedly lived in deplorable conditions without food, water, or usable litter boxes. They're now being vaccinated, spayed, and neutered so they can be adopted.

>>Emmer Announces State of the Union Guests

(Washington, D.C.) -- During tomorrow's (Thur)State of the Union address, Republican Congressman Tom Emmer will be accompanied by two distinguished guests from Minnesota's 6th District. Tom and Cathey, Hoernemann of Andover, are the parents of 32-year-old Major Jeffrey Hoernemann, who died last year when his Osprey aircraft crashed over the coast of Yakushima Island, Japan, during a routine training mission. Seven other members of Hoernemann's crew also died in the crash.

>>Combatting the Prior Authorization Process

(St. Paul, MN) -- Patients who have ever experienced a denial or delay in receiving treatment or medication prescribed by their doctor know how frustrating it can be to deal with insurers' complicated prior authorization processes. Senator Kelly Morrison acknowledges that prior authorization is a familiar and challenging issue, but it has become out of control. She believes that prior authorizations are used for medications and treatments that patients should be encouraged to get. However, the process hinders patients from getting the care they need. Morrison believes this is personal as a physician because she has seen firsthand how the prior authorization process delays care and causes patients to abandon care. Senator Morrison and Representative Kristen Bahner (BAH-ner) are introducing legislation to reduce medication delays, disruptions, and confusion to address this issue.

>>43rd Annual MinnesotaFoodshare March Campaign Underway

(Minneapolis, MN) -- The 43rd annual MinnesotaFoodshare March Campaign is in high gear. Spokeswoman Julia Strautman says it comes at a time when we continue to see increased demand. She says there were 7.5 million visits to food shelves in the state 2023, up 36 percent from the previous year and more than 100 percent from pre-pandemic times. Strautman says the grassroots operation has raised 18 million dollars that is distributed directly to food shelves statewide. You can donate to the March campaign through your local food shelf.

>>More Minnesota Veterans Eligible for VA Benefits

(St. Paul, MN) -- Attention all Minnesota veterans. If you were exposed to toxins or other hazards during your service, you can now enroll directly in V-A health care without applying for V-A disability compensation benefits first. This applies to veterans who served in Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, or any other combat zone after 9/11, as well as anyone who was exposed to hazardous materials during their training or active duty. To find out more about these benefits, please contact your county V-A office in Minnesota.

Minnesotans are utilizing the 988 mental health crisis hotline. According to the state Department of Health, crisis counselors respond to about 3,600 calls and 970 texts monthly. Carolina De Los Rios is the senior program officer of mental health and suicide prevention at Greater Twin Cities United Way, which operates the call center that serves fourteen counties around the Twin Cities metro:

=-----

[tr9882.mp3] :17 "NOW IT'S 988"

(When it became three digits 988, we saw a significant increase in calls we were getting, and I think it's because it's easy to remember and more accessible. People are used to three digits calling 911, calling 211, and now it's 988)

=-----

You can also text 988 and connect with a crisis counselor.

>>Salmonella Could be Lurking in Your Pet's Food, Water Bowls, Mayo Clinic Dr. Comments

(Rochester, MN) – Do you wash your pet's food and water bowls regularly? If not, you could create an environment harboring salmonella, which can infect you and your furry friend. While salmonella is a common cause of food poisoning, it can also be spread by animals and their environments. Mayo Clinic Dr. Tina Ardon says salmonella is a bacterial infection that people can get from touching contaminated food, contaminated water, or from their pets and their food and their feces. Ardon says prevention is one of the best ways to keep yourself safe from salmonella: washing your hands frequently, especially your pet's bowls regularly, and being thoughtful about their food source. Young children, older adults, and immunocompromised people are especially at high risk of getting sick from salmonella infection.

>>Semi Carrying Hay Bales Hits Underside of Railroad Bridge

(Glyndon, MN) -- Railroad inspectors will inspect a bridge on State Highway 9 south of Highway 10 in Clay County near Glyndon after a semi hauling straw bales struck a railroad underpass Tuesday morning. State Patrol Sgt. Jesse Grabow says it does not appear that the underpass was damaged. No one was hurt.

>Home Buyers, Sellers Seeing Market Recovery

(Undated) – Home buyers and sellers are wasting no time this spring. Patti Jo Ritz with Minnesota Realtors says there were 10,555 active listings statewide in February, 17.5% more than in February 2023, noting Detroit Lakes, Duluth, Alexandria, and the Brainerd region saw the largest gains in listing activity, while pending sales rose the most in Detroit Lakes, Alexandria, and Grand Rapids. Ritz says that even though listings are on the rise, demand continues to outweigh supply. Last month's median home price was \$329,000, an increase of 4.4% from last year.

>>MDH Reminds Residents It's National Poison Prevention Week

(Undated) – National Poison Prevention Week and Minnesota's Poison Control System remind residents that a poisoning can happen to anybody at any age, anytime, anywhere. Poison Center Educator Mandy Slag says it's always beneficial to call the poison hotline, "Whether you get bleach splashed in your eye, or a relative takes a double dose of medicine, or your child maybe gets some diaper rash cream in their mouth, we're here to help you out." Slag says Minnesotans can reach the state Regional Poison Center by calling 1-800-222-1222, where poison experts are available 24/7.

>>MN Hospitals Ranked Among 10 Worst in Nation for Community Spending

(St. Paul, MN) -- A new study by the Lown Institute, an independent healthcare think tank, finds that 90% of Minnesota nonprofit hospitals give back less to their communities than they receive in tax breaks, ranking the state as one of the 10 worst in the nation for community spending. This comes as the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) is pushing the Healing Greed Agenda, a compilation of proposed legislation that would "put patient needs before corporate greed." The study singled out Mayo Clinic as one of the worst offenders in the country, alleging the total deficit of funds denied to community contributions in exchange for hospital tax breaks totals \$1.1 billion.

>>ULMC Secures Lead in Lawsuit Against MN DHS

(Golden Valley, MN) -- The Upper Midwest Law Center (ULMC) has secured a victory on behalf of Aaron Norgren in a lawsuit against the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS). Norgren's lawsuit alleges after he opposed the DHS's "extreme anti-racist and gender identity training" and was later refused an opportunity to interview for a promotion he was previously told he was qualified for. The District of MN initially dismissed the case, but the federal Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed this, reinstating the lawsuit against the state.

Lake Region Healthcare reminds people that March 26, 2024 is Diabetes Alert Day, a one-day “wake-up call” that focuses on the seriousness of diabetes and the importance of understanding your risk. More than 1 in 3 adults – about 98 million Americans -- have prediabetes, and 81% of them don’t know they have it. Prediabetes is a serious health condition where the amount of glucose/sugar in the blood is higher than normal but not yet high enough to be diagnosed as type 2 diabetes. Without healthy lifestyle changes, prediabetes can progress to type 2 diabetes. Prediabetes also puts you at increased risk of heart attack, stroke, and kidney disease. But the good news is, it can be reversed. Being diagnosed with prediabetes can give you enough time to change the outcome by making positive diet and lifestyle changes. The first step is to find out whether you’re at risk. It only takes 1-minute to find out! Know where you stand by visiting DoIHavePrediabetes.org

Legislation co-authored by State Representative Jeff Backer, R-Browns Valley, aimed at providing crucial aid to licensed ambulance service providers, received its inaugural committee hearing today (March 19th) in the Health Finance and Policy Committee.

"As a member of the EMS Task Force and a volunteer EMT since 1995, I have brought a unique perspective to the crisis facing ambulance services in Greater Minnesota," said Backer. "This one-time, emergency funding will help to ensure that services can continue uninterrupted for Minnesotans living in rural communities. However, the problems facing these life-saving services run deep and will likely require significant, structural changes to ensure the long-term viability of EMS across Minnesota."

The bill establishes an aid program for licensed ambulance service providers, to be administered by the commissioner of revenue, and makes a one-time appropriation of \$122.5 million for the program. It successfully passed out of the Health Finance and Policy Committee and has been referred to the Taxes Committee for further action.

>>Fosston Hopes to Retain Hospital Employees if Essentia Loses Agreement

(Fosston, MN) -- City officials in Fosston hope to retain all the local employees if their nonprofit, First Care Medical Services, gets control of the hospital back from Essentia Health. Many hospital workers were among the 60-plus people who attended a special city council meeting Tuesday night. Fosston Mayor Jim Offerdahl says they assured them that all present employees would be welcomed by First Care Medical Services. The city's operational agreement with Essentia Health is scheduled to go to arbitration in July. The dispute stems from Essentia ending baby deliveries in Fosston.

>>Minnesota's 'About Average' Flu Season Continues in March

(St. Paul, MN) -- State health officials are calling this flu season "about average" in Minnesota. Department of Health Epidemiologist Melissa McMahon says it's not over yet. She says this year the peak has not been as high, but it's been sticking around. Minnesota started getting a lot of flu cases in late December and McMahon says the activity has stayed fairly consistent since then. There have been 99 flu-related deaths and more than 28 hundred hospitalizations through late February. She adds that not too late to get a flu shot.

A bill is moving forward in the Democrat-controlled state Senate that would require all health insurance plans in Minnesota cover what's called gender-affirming care. Republicans tried unsuccessfully to exempt religious groups:

=-----

[bwgenderinsurance1.mp3] :10 "SERVICES DESCRIBED"

..."organizations who have sincerely-held religious beliefs that would prevent them from wanting the resources that they have to go to pay for the services described."

=-----

...Fergus Falls Senator Jordan Rasmusson. But Minneapolis Democrat Scott Dibble warns that would create two classes of people in Minnesota:

=-----

[bwgenderinsurance2.mp3] :09 "DIGNITY AND WORTH"

..."whether or not they can access what I view as a fundamental civil and human right, (and) affirm who they are as a human being and access what they need to live lives of dignity and worth."

=-----

A companion bill is moving forward in the Democrat-controlled Minnesota House.

(St. Paul, MN) — A bill in the Minnesota House would strengthen requirements and increase transparency for large healthcare organizations ending services at local hospitals. Fosston City Administrator Cassie Heide says current law requires a 120-day notice and public hearing before curtailing or moving health care services.

She told a House committee, “What makes this revised bill so important is seeing what Essentia was allowed to do in Fosston with little to no repercussions or accountability to the communities they serve. Essentia Health’s mandated hearing under the current bill was held via Teams 606 days after babies stopped being delivered in Fosston.”

Several healthcare organizations have recently closed labor and delivery or mental health units at hospitals in greater Minnesota, such as Lake Region Healthcare’s closure of the Bridgeway Inpatient Behavioral Health Unit in Fergus Falls

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) is going to hold a public meeting on February 20th at 6 p.m. to discuss Lake Region Healthcare's (LRHC) closure of Bridgeway Inpatient Behavioral Health Unit. LRHC announced on February 2nd that they would be shutting down the unit, citing reduction in demand for services, dwindling admissions, and the inability to recruit permanent physician coverage.

LRHC will continue to offer outpatient mental health services, and are partnering with other inpatient units in the area.

The hearing is being held as required by legislation passed in 2021, where healthcare companies are required to notify the public and hold a public hearing before the closure of any hospital or campuses, or before the ceasing or relocation of services.

On Friday February 2nd, Lake Region Healthcare announced that it will be closing its Bridgeway Inpatient Behavioral Health Unit in Fergus Falls. The company cites reduction in demand for services, dwindling admissions, and the inability to recruit permanent physician coverage as the factors for the decision. "We have worked intensely and innovatively over recent years to recruit new providers who desire to work in the inpatient setting, to adjust admission criteria to increase admissions, and to work with referral sources to identify opportunities to serve more patients in need," said CEO, Kent Mattson.

Despite these efforts, LRH continues to rely on temporary providers, and are finding that referral sources find placements in different inpatient service models that better fit most patient needs. While there is a high demand for mental health services overall, the voluntary, very specialized type of inpatient mental health service at Bridgeway is not a match for patient demands of today, with an average of 3 of the 14 beds in the unit occupied. Mattson added, "our own experience and the experience of surrounding emergency departments is that the type of inpatient services that are in the highest demand don't fall into the type of service we have offered here."

While mental health is a common reason for emergency room visits, once patients are medically stable, they are either discharged to the home and referred to outpatient therapy in follow-up, or placement for inpatient treatment is sought at an appropriate facility, which is normally dictated by insurance. "We want people to know that keeping Bridgeway open won't help more people qualify for the type of inpatient services Bridgeway is set up to provide." Mattson said. LRH has communicated with Prairie St. John's in Fargo who says their new facility has capacity for future patient needs that previously would have been served at Bridgeway. Other options, depending on patient needs, include the Community Behavioral Health Hospital, Red River Behavioral Health in Grand Forks, and the Grace Unit in Brainerd, among others.

"It's incumbent upon on us to use our resources to make the most meaningful impact on the mental health needs of our communities. We know we can better use our resources to serve the mental health needs of

many, many more people than we have been able to under this model," Mattson emphasized.

"Our goal and our commitment is to meet mental health care needs where the greatest impact can be made, which appears to be within outpatient services." LRH currently has three outpatient psychiatric providers in its Fergus Falls Clinic: Dr. Dan Traiser, Dr. Jackie Huber, and Nurse Practitioner Genie Loeffler. Diana Tran, PMHNP starts as an additional provider on the team this month and a fifth outpatient practitioner is expected to join later this year. They are also looking at a possible addition of mental health services in the Elbow Lake location that would serve the population in that region closer to home.

"We will continue to invest in outpatient mental services to continue to serve and grow in the clinical setting. In the current financial state of healthcare, we must use our resources to make the most meaningful impact on the mental health needs that are in greatest demand in our communities," Mattson said, adding that LRH will continue to explore new models and opportunities to do so. "We haven't ruled out opening a new type of inpatient mental health unit, but we know that any new model of care that might be implemented would require substantial renovation and a very different staffing structure. Things are changing all the time, and we have to keep up with the changing needs."

Employees of the Bridgeway unit are an important part of the transition plan and LRH is working to help place them in other open positions across the organization. "We currently have over 60 open positions at LRH, with over 20 of them in nursing positions," said Patty Roth, Chief Nursing Officer. "We can't thank the Bridgeway team enough for the outstanding work they have done on behalf of our patients through the years. They are highly dedicated and skilled mental health professionals and advocates. We have much gratitude for all of them and we are here to support them as they transition," Roth said. The transition to closure of Bridgeway will take place over the next six weeks. State statute requires a public notice and public hearing before the closure of hospital services which is expected to happen in the next 45 days.

>>Congressman Emmer's Family Home a Target of Swatting Incident

(Delano, MN) -- Minnesota Congressman Tom Emmer says he and his family were the target of a "swatting" incident over the weekend. Emmer said on social media that it happened Saturday night and involved a 9-1-1 prank call that wrongly diverted a police presence to his home. The 6th District Republican wrote, "Thankfully, no one was home or injured. I condemn this illegal abuse of police resources." Emmer thanked the Wright County Sheriff's Office for their professionalism and support.

>>Funeral for Murdered St. Paul Activist Attended to by MN Leaders

(St. Paul, MN) -- Minnesota leaders including Governor Tim Walz, U-S Senator Tina Smith, and Attorney General Keith Ellison joined hundreds of community members Saturday for the funeral of 50-year-old Hmong St. Paul activist Tou Ger Xiong. Xiong was kidnapped, robbed, and killed in Columbia last December while visiting South America. Four people have been charged in connection with his murder.

>>Minnesota Newborns Will be Screened for Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy

(St. Paul, MN) -- The Minnesota Department of Health is adding Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD) to the list of conditions for which newborns are routinely screened. The most common form of muscular dystrophy, D-M-D is a genetic condition that gradually makes the body's muscles weaker with a life expectancy of around 20 years old. State Health Commissioner Brooke Cunningham says "being able to detect life-altering conditions through newborn screening means families can be connected to early interventions and treatment that can not only improve a child's quality of life but also save lives." Minnesota health officials estimate nine newborns will be detected each year.